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Introduction

There is a largely forgotten idea about God that the Christian Church has taught for the past 1800 years (at least). It is one that goes to the very nature of what He\(^1\) is and what He is not. It is so deep and profound that it has historically governed much, if not most, of what the Church has said or not said about Him. In fact, not only have Christians historically held to it, but so to have Muslims, Jews, and even a range of secular philosophers throughout history. And yet, even in the midst of this wide agreement on the matter, the chances are that unless you are an academic, a philosopher, or a seminary student, you have probably never heard of it (and even if you are one of those three, you might still not have!). This book is about that idea, why it is important, and why you should understand it.

It is called Divine Simplicity (for the rest of this book, I may also refer to it as Simplicity or DS).

Don’t let the name fool you. If you thought the Trinity is mind benging, let me assure you that this one is even harder. In short, there is nothing simple about Simplicity. Still, I am convinced that a good deal of our misunderstandings and arguments about God would go away—in fact, they would seem downright silly—if we understood what the Church has always said on this matter. So I’m going to try to explain it.

I don’t expect it will be easy for me to do so, and I hope you don’t expect it will be particularly easy for you, either. Still, I’m going to try to make this as painless as I can. I’m going to avoid as much academic language and philosophy as possible. I won’t be quoting this scholar and that paper, so there won’t be many footnotes at the bottom of the pages. I won’t be throwing Greek and Latin terms at you, and on the very rare instances I have to use technical jargon, I’ll be sure to explain it as clearly as I can and get away from it as soon as possible.

If it isn’t clear what the purpose and nature of this work is already, then, let me put it plainly now: I am writing this book in non-technical language for a non-technical audience in hopes of explaining and defending a very technical issue. This is not at all intended to be a scholarly account, so I ask my scholarly readers in advance for your forgiveness as there will be times that you can expect to want to pull your hair out (if you have any left after all those years of study) if and when I gloss over some issues. There

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\(^{1}\) I will always use the capitalized masculine pronouns to refer to God (“He,” “Him,” etc.). I realize that such language makes some people uncomfortable, but beyond any theological arguments one way or the other, it is simply convention. Honestly, I get frustrated at reading “he or she”—it just makes for bad writing—and to be rather frank, I’m not going to spend the time writing the phrase out every time. If the language bothers you, I ask only for your patience and forgiveness on this matter of style.
is a place for technical literature. This is not it. For those who want a more technical analysis of DS and its associated problems, I would point you to my thesis, which is available on my blog at http://cmmorrison.wordpress.com/papers. In short, if you want to understand DS and don’t want to spend hours or even years studying Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics (you could well be confused at the mere mention of those few words!), then this book is for you.

I’m going to divide this work into three parts totaling fourteen chapters. Part One is a general discussion of what Simplicity is and why we should affirm it. So in the first chapter, I will offer a quick primer on what the doctrine actually teaches—its definition, what it does say, and what it does not. Don’t be surprised if you have more questions than answers at that point. You’ll probably first be struck at just how odd Simplicity is. You’ll probably then be surprised at how complicated this Simplicity turns out to be. And following that, you’ll likely find yourself wondering, “So what?”

Try to hold off on the “So what?” question. Before we get to it, we’ll need to know why people believe it in the first place, which I’ll do in chapters two, three, and four, which complete Part One. I actually think those chapters are the most important of this book, because they get to the heart of the matter. In chapter two, I’m going to present the first argument for why we ought to accept DS, which will be based on traditionally accepted ideas of what it means to be God anyway. In other words, if you already believe in God, the chances are you already believe certain things about Him to be true. There’s not a ton of philosophy in that section, and if you are already a Bible-believing Christian, you’ll probably find it the most interesting.

Chapters three and four together make up the second argument and are something of a unit in themselves. In chapter three, I’m going to present an argument for God’s existence. Please note that the purpose of this book is not apologetic—that is, I’m not writing to prove that God actually exists, so don’t get too excited about learning a new proof for God that you can use to win a debate. I actually teach apologetics (that is, how we know what we believe is true), so I’m quite a fan of arguments for His existence. I use many of them frequently. I think this one is pretty good, too, but I’m probably not going in enough detail for you to go out and use this to prove to your atheist friends that God exists. If you want to see this argument in that context, go get Edward Feser’s The Last Superstition. For now, just know that I’m going to use this argument precisely because it gives us some important language to talk about God’s nature so that we can see why DS must be true. In other words, my interests here are primarily theological rather than apologetic.

That gets us into chapter four. There, I’m going to make an argument based on the argument made in chapter three. I can’t help but get into some philosophical ideas, but I’ll do my best to make it as easy as I can for you. So just get some coffee, find a quiet
place, and enjoy the ride. The rewards are, I think, well worth the work! And, best of all, if you get a grip on that material, it will pay off major dividends not only as you go through the rest of the book but as you think about God in your own quiet time, study, and meditations.

So ends Part One. Part Two is comprised of chapters five through twelve and takes up the bulk of the volume of this book. Here, we're going to look at some of the major objections to Divine Simplicity. This section has two purposes. First, and most obviously, we want to take seriously the objections of very good and very smart men and women and consider their reasons for rejecting the doctrine. At the same time that we work to overcome those objections, though, we'll also enjoy the benefit of getting to clarify just what DS teaches at a more detailed level.

Getting started there, then, the fifth chapter is written primarily for Christians, and evangelical, Bible believing Christians in particular. They (or I should say “we,” as I consider myself an evangelical, Bible believing Christian) tend to want to make sure whatever is said about God is at least consistent with Scripture and even better that it comes directly from Scripture. As such, one common objection from these Christians to DS is that it is too philosophical and not biblical enough. So I’ll spend some time showing that Simplicity meets both demands. If, then, you are not a Christian or not particularly worried about the biblical witness, feel free to skip this chapter (although even in that case you may find it useful reading because reading that discussion will give you a clearer understanding of the importance of philosophy when thinking about any subject; you may even find some parallel thoughts in your own beliefs that you had not considered before).

I’ll move on to discuss some major objections to DS in chapters six through twelve, with each chapter taking up its own argument. Again, I’ll distinguish between more generally philosophical arguments (in seven and eight) and more specifically theological, which is to say, more Christian arguments (in nine through twelve, and the last two especially).

Finally, chapters thirteen and fourteen will make up Part Three, in which we will conclude with a general discussion on why this is all so terribly important. In chapter thirteen, I’ll show a few apologetic benefits of accepting God’s Simplicity as well as some problems that come up if we deny it. In other words, chapter thirteen is the most apologetic of this book and really gets into that “so what” question you might have been wondering about. Finally, in chapter fourteen, to really drive home the “So what?” question, I’ll offer a sample of what I think to be some important devotional benefits DS provides. In other words, can this odd, abstract doctrine actually make us “better” people of faith? Treated the right way, I think it can. And with that, I’ll offer my own conclusions in an epilogue of sorts, which sort of functions as a “where to go from here” discussion.
On a final note, I want to expand on a point I made before about my own perspective. I am a conservative, evangelical Christian. I intentionally write and argue from that position. At the same time, while several of these chapters deal with specifically Christian issues, I intend the arguments and explanations that follow to be useful to anyone and everyone who appreciates the value of good reasoning, regardless of your faith (or lack thereof). As such, don’t expect to see me quote from Scripture too often. For my Christian readers, it is helpful to know that I am largely working from what Christian theologians have called general revelation—that is, from ideas that are “publically available” about God, ideas that everyone can know about Him based on creation and pure reason. I don’t believe that everything can be known about Him from this approach. Some things are known only by faith, although they are certainly consistent with reason. These issues are matters of what is called “special revelation,” and we know they are true because Scripture tells us so (e.g., the Virgin birth of Christ, that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, etc.). So while I believe that DS is both compatible with and in fact demanded by special revelation (and thus chapters two and five), this is not a matter of special revelation only or even primarily. In short, this is something we can know about Him just by looking at creation itself and using that great gift God has given us . . . the gift of reason.
Part One

Divine Simplicity: What It Is and the Argument for It

Chapters one through four will present the basic arguments for DS. In my own research, I’ve been surprised at how often these arguments are either not presented or else how they just aren’t taken seriously. The historical change is jarring. I am reminded of a comment made by an evangelical theologian describing the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone. The writer noted that, in Paul’s hands, justification by faith was not simply something he defended (as books like Romans and Galatians are often thought to be), but rather it became a weapon with which he fought against heresy.

Historically, DS has held just such a role. Because the arguments in its favor are so powerful and so foundational, it has been used to govern and test much of everything else said about God. So if some idea ended up contradicting DS, far from challenging DS, it was considered proof that the new idea was false!

The situation today couldn’t be more different. Most Protestant theological texts either ignore it entirely or else give it little more than passing comment deep in a chapter about God’s various attributes. I think Protestant theology is deeply diminished by that sad fact. The goal for this section, then, is not merely to show what DS is and teaches, but to begin to establish it in your mind as a foundational doctrine to good Christian theology.
Chapter One: What Is Divine Simplicity?

When we hear the word “simplicity” or “simple,” our first thought is usually something like “not complicated” or “easy to understand.” That’s not, though, the only thing the word means, even in English. It also has the idea of not being made up of a lot of parts. A mousetrap is a fairly simple machine in that regard. Sure, it is easy to understand. It’s not that complicated. But the reason it is easy to understand, the reason it is not that complicated, is because there aren’t that many parts. A traditional trap has about five: the platform, the hammer, the spring, the hold-down bar, and the catch. You can certainly make more complicated traps if you like. But the more parts you add, the harder it will be to see how it works. As it stands here, though, the traditional trap is fairly simple, both in terms of how hard it is to understand and, more importantly or our purposes, how few parts there are.

The mousetrap is not, of course, the only simple machine out there. Some are even simpler. An engineer will tell you that wedges, wheels, levers, inclined plains, screws, and pulleys, and other such objects are “simple machines.” They are using the word “simple” here the same way I am. Most of these have very few parts. Some have only one. How many parts, after all, are in an inclined plane? And yet such a “machine” is a very important part of our daily lives. When, for example, was the last time you used a ramp of any sort? Just imagine how much more difficult a world without inclined planes would be!

So it should be clear enough that something that is “simple” may well be easy to understand, but whether that is or is not the case, we can also say thing are more or less “simple” depending on how many parts they have. A human being is pretty complex, in the sense of having a lot of parts. A cell is complex, too, but less than a human. In that sense, the cell is “simpler” than a human being. A new car is less complex or simpler still, and a Model T (the first car Henry Ford mass produced, if you aren’t up to date on your history) seems pretty simple by comparison.

This brings us to the basic idea behind Divine Simplicity: the idea is that God is not composed of parts.
Simple, isn’t it?

Not so much, actually. According to DS, whenever we consider a statement about God, the test we always have to apply is this: “Does this imply that God has parts?” If so, then DS rejects the statement as false. It turns out that it is really hard for us to imagine a truly simple God. For example, you and I are not simple beings. We are composed of all kinds of parts. We have hands and feet and legs and brains and organs and cells and the like. In other words, we have bodies. So take that all away from God. DS would insist that God can’t have a body, because if He did, He would not be simple (since He would be composed of parts).

If that were all DS said, there would hardly be a controversy. Most religions don’t imagine that God has a physical body. Mormons might, and some Christians might be puzzled with this given the fact that Jesus had a body. But beyond that, I think the idea that God is an immaterial Spirit seems easily acceptable to most people.

Yet alas, dear reader, DS insists it must say more. Remember, it requires that there are no parts in God of any kind. So let’s look back at ourselves for more ways in which we can be divided up. One obvious way is that I exist in time. I have a past, a present, and a future. Part of me is past. Part of me is present. Part of me is future. DS, then, denies that God has such temporal parts. So it says that God has no past, present, or future. God simply is. (That reminds me of the name He called Himself by in Exodus: I Am.) According to DS, God is timeless.

Another way I am divided up is that I take up space. This goes to the fact that I have a body. I am just shy of six feet tall, so you can say that part of me is “here,” and look a few feet in one direction and find another part of me “there.” Again, DS denies that of God. Since He doesn’t have a body, He isn’t “here” and “there” in the sense of taking up any space. God is not located here or there. Once again, DS would say that God simply is.

What about the fact that I can change? That suggests some other kinds of “parts.” For example, right now I have fairly short hair (thanks to my stylist). But if I don’t get it cut, then sooner rather than later I will experience a change. My hair will get much longer, and my wife will experience the change of being far less happy with me. That means that I have the capacity for growing longer hair than I have now. I don’t actually have longer hair right now; I have the capacity for it. But those are types of parts. A part of me is what I actually am. Another part of me is what I could turn out to be—my capacities, or to use the old technical word, my potentialities (in the sense that I have the potential to be some other way—in our example now, to have long hair). DS, then, would say that God isn’t composed of what He is and what He could be. He just is what He is. He couldn’t be anything else. Why? Again, because if God is simple, He has no parts, not
even the kinds that distinguish between what He actually is and what He potentially could be (we’ll talk a lot more about this idea in chapter four).

If I can steal a line from TV infomercials, I would say, “But wait, there’s more!” Still thinking about those capacities, what about my abilities to love, to hate, to be happy or sad? In other words, what about all of my emotions? It’s obvious that love is not the same thing as sadness. So it seems I can say that part of me has the ability to feel this thing called love, which is different from the part of me that has the ability to feel this other thing called sadness. When I am sad I am different from when I am happy. But that all points to more parts, which DS says has to go when we think about God. That’s right. On DS, God doesn’t have all kinds of different emotions. He doesn’t even have emotional reactions. After all emotional reactions need not just one set of parts, but two: you need the different emotional parts (like love and sadness) and you need the temporal parts—the past, present, and future—so that you can first have one emotional state and later have another. On DS, none of that can be said about God. Yet again, He just is.

This is starting to get weird, isn’t it? Well let’s get just a bit weirder.

Not only does DS not allow for all those different emotions in God, but what about those different things you and I can do? I can run, walk, sit, laugh, play, cry, and so on. I can think. I know things. We know that God can do the same things. He has the power to act. In fact, we have traditionally said that God has all power, and the word we use for that is “omnipotence.” We say He knows things, and traditionally, that He knows all things. The word for that is “omniscience.” It’s pretty basic theology to say that God has certain attributes. But DS seems to forbid even that! After all, God is not composed of parts, so He can’t be made up partly of omniscience and partly of omnipotence and on and on. In other words, the “recipe” for God isn’t one part omniscience, one part omnipotence, one part omnipresence (being everywhere (and “everywhen”) at the same time), all with healthy scoop of perfect love. If God is simple, then it turns out that in some odd way, all of those attributes are really just one and the same thing. Omniscience just is omnipotence; Omnipresence just is omnibenevolence (to be all loving); and just so with all His attributes.

I hope by now you are starting to get the picture. DS is a pretty serious idea with major consequences. If God has no parts, then everything in God is really just one and the same thing. You can’t look at one part of Him and say, “This is so and so,” and then another part and say, “Ah, and that is so and so.” No, everything in God is just that: God. In fact, DS is so radical that it doesn’t even allow us to distinguish between the fact that God exists and the way He exists. Let’s consider ourselves a final time to better understand this last example. I am a white, American male. That’s the way I exist. But just because you imagine a white, American male, that doesn’t suddenly mean I exist.
You didn’t think me up, after all. If that were the case, you could just imagine ten million dollars in your bank account and then go cash a check. So there is a difference between your idea of something—or the way that something would exist if it actually did—and the fact that it exists. This means that part of me is the fact of my existence (that’s called my being), and another part of me is the way I exist (that is called my nature or essence).

Perhaps you can see where this is going. If DS is true, we cannot even distinguish between those two parts in God. The way He exists is the fact that He exists. In other words, I have a nature that really exists. That pile of money in your mind, though, has a nature (ten million dollars), but sadly, I would bet that it doesn’t have any real being or existence outside of your own mind. Yet for God, His nature just is His existence. In other words, His nature is His existence, and His existence is His nature. Put simply: God is Existence Itself. He is Pure, Undifferentiated, Unlimited, and Infinite Being. And to clarify, He is not a Being who happens to be Infinite, Unlimited, and Undifferentiated. He is Being Itself, complete in its purest, undivided, unlimited sense.

Let your mind try to wrap around that for a minute!

On DS, it turns out to be silly to ask whether or not God exists. You are just asking whether or not existence exists. In fact, the sentence “God exists” is really rather redundant, sort of like saying, “Triangles have three sides.” Of course they do. That is what it means to be a triangle—and just so with God. You don’t point to this thing “out there,” call it “God,” and ask if “it” has being. Again, God is not a being alongside others. That wouldn’t be Existence Itself, but rather Existence being this or that way. But on DS, that’s not God. On this view, again, God just is.

So what’s the bottom line? What is Divine Simplicity?

DS is what we call a negative doctrine, in that it says less of what God is and more about what He is not. It says that, in God, there is no composition of any kind. As such, it asks if any idea implies parts in Him, and if so, it denies that idea is true. So DS says that God is not composed of parts. It says that, in Him, everything just is the divine nature, including His very existence. It says that everything in God is identical with everything else. His omnipotence is His omniscience, which is His omnipresence, etc. More than that, DS says that those things are not merely identical with one another, but
they are identical with God Himself. That is, God’s omniscience simply is His omnipresence, but “both” just is God (pardon the bad grammar)!

I know, a strange doctrine indeed. Why would anyone hold it? Why should we even bother with it? Great questions! We’ll spend the next several chapters answering it. In the meantime, I want to say in passing that this isn’t a new idea. In fact, the idea itself is older than Christianity. I won’t bore you with the details, but early Greek philosophers like Socrates (469-399 BC), Plato (428-348 BC), and Aristotle (384-322 BC) all held to it in one form or fashion (which was a big deal, because it led them to reject the polytheism so common in their day). Jewish theologians like Rabad I (1110-1180 AD) and Maimonides (1138-1204 AD) have insisted on it, as have Islamic theologians such as Avicenna (980-1037 AD) and Averroes (1126–1198 AD). But I don’t want you to think that the idea has only been popular among non-Christians. In fact, it has dominated the Church from the earliest days and found proponents in men such as Irenaeus (130-202 AD), Augustine (354–430 AD), Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109 AD), and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 AD). I could literally list pages of Christian theologians and philosophers who have held to this belief, from the earliest days of the Church down to the present.

My point to all this is that, as odd as DS might sound, people who have spent their whole lives thinking about this issue have decided that it has to be true. Centuries before Jesus walked this earth, people were arguing God is simple. The Church, Muslims, Jews, and others have all agreed on this matter, and perhaps more importantly, they have all agreed that it is absolutely foundational.

Is it possible that they knew something that we don’t? I think so, and to see why, we’ll need to start by asking what persuaded the greatest minds the world has ever known that such a strange doctrine is actually true.
Chapter Two: Is Divine Simplicity True?
A Traditional Argument

At this point it should be pretty clear that a lot of people, some you might have heard of and a lot you probably haven’t, have insisted on Divine Simplicity. But now the natural question becomes, why? Isn’t it just enough to accept the fact that God exists? And aren’t we just trying to put God in a box with this kind of thinking? Frankly, this not-very-simple idea of Simplicity seems like a lot of human reason trying to figure out what is way beyond human reason, right?

Maybe, but I think if we give these people a chance to explain themselves, we’ll see that they were on to something after all. As I said in the introduction, I’m not going to be doing a lot of quoting this or that source, so permit me to speak for them a bit here. There were actually lots of reasons these brilliant people held to DS, but I’ll limit myself to two arguments—a theological or biblical argument, which I’ll cover in this chapter, and a philosophical one, which we’ll get to over the next in the next two.

Turning to the first, I’ll start by noting that you probably already believe that God exists. And further, you likely already believe some things about Him that, when we really think about them, would lead us to conclude that God is simple. Two of them are of special importance for us to consider: sovereignty and aseity.

Now, again, if you already believe that God exists, it is almost certain that you believe that God is sovereign—that is, that He reigns over the universe. That is, after all, just what we mean when we say that God is “the Supreme Being.” The second idea, though, might already have you a bit confused. What is “aseity” and why would I say that you probably hold to it? In short, aseity (from a Latin phrase meaning, “of one’s self”) is the idea that God exists completely independently of creation, that is, that He doesn’t depend on anything at all. If you believe that God created the universe out of nothing, then you believe that although creation cannot exist without God, God can exist without creation. To put it still another way, the world needs God. God doesn’t need it.

Based on those two ideas, we can make the following argument:

1. God is not dependent on anything other than Himself;
2. Any being made up of parts is dependent on something other than itself for its existence;
3. Therefore, God cannot be made up of parts (that is, He is simple).

In other words, if this argument works—and we’ll look at it in some detail below—then if you think that God is the Creator of the universe, then you also have to believe that God is simple. And since most of those philosophers and theologians we mentioned in the last chapter believed that God is the Creator of the universe, it isn’t too surprising that
they also opted to accept DS. Therefore, the question is just whether or not the argument works, and the only way to decide that is to look at it in detail. We'll do that by looking at the two premises one by one.

*The First Premise*

The first was that “God is not dependent on anything other than Himself.” This comes directly out of both the ideas of sovereignty and aseity. After all, if God is dependent on anything, then He is not in complete control over it. And if God is dependent on anything, then He does not exist independently of it. In other words, if God needs anything, then it has some degree of control over Him and He could not exist without it. We could, of course, just say that God is not really sovereign after all and that God does depend on other things for His existence (in other words, we could deny His aseity). My point here is just that if God really is sovereign and if aseity really is true, then the first premise is also true.

So should we believe that God is sovereign and that He depends on nothing else? I think most people would rightly say yes. First, whatever intuition is worth in such cases, it certainly seems in our favor here. After all, what kind of “God” would God be if there were things that He had no control over or things that He depended on? A lot of people might argue that God is not in control over our choices—that is, that we have free will (and I'm one of those people!)—but even there they probably wouldn’t say that God isn’t sovereign or that He needs us to choose this or that. If they really thought about it, they would likely say something like they need God if they are to make any kind of choice, that no choice they make surprises God, and that God's will is always accomplished no matter what we do or don’t do (in other words, they would be assuming that God is sovereign). So it seems that sovereignty and aseity are just part of what it means to be God. Sort of like triangles just have three sides, so that if something doesn’t have three sides then it isn’t a triangle, in the same way God just is sovereign and doesn’t depend on anything else. So if something is not sovereign or if something is dependent on anything else in any way, then whatever it is, it’s not God!

Religions have tended to agree with our intuition that we ought to attribute aseity and sovereignty to God. For those who take the Bible seriously, several passages seem to strongly affirm those ideas. The first and most important is Genesis 1:1. It says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Now, if God created something, then He can exist without it. And therefore, if God created something, then God can exist without anything else. So it seems that the Genesis account of creation means that God, the Creator of everything out of nothing (which makes Him sovereign over everything), depends on absolutely nothing for His existence other than Himself (which means we must affirm His aseity). Actually, we can go one step further. It would seem by the same logic that if someone says that God is dependent on something, then they
are contradicting Genesis 1:1. After all, if God can't exist without something, then He
couldn’t have created it, otherwise, when it didn’t exist (prior to His creating it) then He
wouldn’t have existed. So if God is dependent on anything in the universe, then He
couldn’t have created it. And in that case, God didn’t really create “the heavens and the
earth” (which, by the way, is the way the Hebrew language talks about “the whole
universe”).

But Genesis 1:1 isn’t the only verse that affirms God’s sovereignty and aseity. Other
verses (and this is certainly not an exhaustive list) that we can go to include Exodus
3:14, Job 41:11, Isaiah 40:18-28, John 1:3, Acts 17:24-25, Colossians 1:16-17, and
Revelation 1:8.

Exodus 3:14

Exodus 3:14 says, “God said to Moses, ‘I Am Who I Am,’ and He said, ‘Thus you shall
say to the sons of Israel, “I Am has sent me to you’.” Whatever one interprets God’s
name “I Am” to mean, its very wording speaks to God’s self-existence. In fact, Jesus
apparently made use of both the unique name for God itself as well as its temporal
significance in John 8:58 to emphasize His own preexistence. Thus, if we deny Gods
sovereignty and aseity, then it would seem that whatever God is, He is not, contrary to
the Bible, ‘I Am.’

Job 41:11

In Job 41:11, God asks Job, “Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is
under the whole heaven is Mine.” Here, God points out that no one has ever given Him
anything, for everything that anyone has first came from Him. He then boils down this
fact into a basic theological truth: everything belongs to God (cf. Ps. 50:10-12). As such,
God requires nothing and owes nothing to anything. On the contrary, all owe everything
to Him. That is to say, God is dependent on nothing, but everything is dependent on
God, which is just another way of talking about God’s sovereignty and aseity. Thus, if
we deny God’s sovereignty and aseity, then it would seem that everything does not
belong to God, that He does receive some things from creation, and therefore creation
is in some real sense not dependent on God.

Isaiah 40:18-28

In this passage, like many others, God is exalted as the Uncreated Creator who cannot
be compared to anyone or anything. Isaiah 40:28 in particular says, “Do you not know?
Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the
earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable.” So here God is
called the “everlasting” God who created the “ends” of the earth, which also means that
He created everything in between. Thus, Isaiah is picturesquely describing two things
about God that support His sovereignty and aseity. First, He is everlasting, which means that He has always existed, even before creation did. But that means, as we have seen, that He can't possibly depend on anything in creation. So it would seem that to deny God's sovereignty or aseity would be to say that He does need something in creation, which would be to deny His eternality. Second, Isaiah affirms again that this everlasting God created everything within the world. As such, everything finds itself dependent on Him. Therefore, to deny God's sovereignty or aseity would once again be to deny that God is really the Creator.

John 1:3

John 1:3 says, “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” In the prologue of his Gospel, John sets out to establish the divinity of Christ, and here makes Him the instrument by which God created everything. Thus, Scriptures directly teach the dependency of all created things on Christ and thus not only God the Father's sovereignty and aseity but also Jesus’.²

Acts 17:24-25

Acts 17:24-25 records a part of Paul’s sermon to the Athenians in which he said, “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with 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.” Paul's statement here includes four propositions that entail God's aseity. First, Paul says God made the world and all things in it. Therefore, He cannot be dependent on anything in it, which means, again, that He depends on nothing other than Himself. Second, God is the “Lord of heaven and earth,” which means He is sovereign over all of creation. Therefore, everything is under His authority, and therefore He cannot be dependent on anything. Third, He does not need anything, since He is self-sufficient and thus absolutely independent. Finally, God is the source of everything that anyone has, including their very life. If God is the source of all things, then He lacks nothing and is therefore dependent on nothing. In other words, Paul taught God's aseity. So following Paul’s thoughts, if we deny God's sovereignty and aseity by saying that He is dependent on anything other than Himself, then we would have to deny that God made the world and everything in it, that He is Lord of heaven and earth, that He needs nothing, and that He is the source of everything.

Colossians 1:16-17

Colossians 1:16-17 says, “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all

² We will deal with questions about Jesus, the Trinity, and DS in Part II.
things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Hopefully, the idea should be starting to get clear by now. In these verses, Paul declares the dependency of all things on Christ, much like we saw John did at the beginning of his Gospel. What is really interesting here, though, is the fact that Paul includes “the invisible.” I suppose that someone could argue that “creation” only includes the visible, physical world, and that perhaps some invisible, spiritual “stuff” exists that God needs and depends on. But if even that invisible “stuff” was created by Christ, then we can’t say that He is dependent on any of it, either. Further, Paul insists that all things are sustained by Christ, meaning they were not merely dependent on Him for their creation, but they need Him even now for their very existence. But if this is true, then it is even less possible for God to be dependent in any way on His creation, since He would be dependent on something dependent on Him. Thus, we must agree with God’s aseity, and we see that to deny that is to deny God as Creator and now also God as Sustainer. In case you missed it, that would mean that there are things that just don’t need God!

Revelation 1:8

Finally, Revelation 1:8 says, “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’” In this verse, Jesus declares His eternity. Since He has no beginning and no end, He was brought into existence by nothing and does not have the capacity to go out of existence. Again, then, we see that Jesus (and thus God) existed before anything else did and will continue to exist after everything else is gone. Therefore, Scripture seems to declare again that God is dependent on absolutely nothing other than Himself, since He was before there was anything else.

All these verses, then, seem to teach clearly enough that God is dependent on nothing, exists solely within Himself, is sovereign over all things, and is the source and sustainer of everything. That is to say, the doctrines of sovereignty and aseity, with both their implications for the natures of God and creation, enjoy strong Scriptural support.

The Second Premise

The second premise of our argument is that “any being made up of parts is dependent on something other than itself for its existence.” This ought to be obviously true, but in case it isn’t, let’s consider it in some detail. To do so, let’s start with some easy examples. Cars, people, and shapes are all made up of parts. So what happens if you take the engine out of a car, the heart out of a human, or one of the sides out of a square or triangle? Obviously, the car wouldn’t work, the person would die, and the square would no longer be a square at all. In fact, every single thing in the physical world you can think of is like that. Stars, trees, mountains, pencils, dogs, household
cleaning supplies, books about Divine Simplicity, and everything else you’ve ever seen is made up of a collection of things. Take some or all of their parts away and the things just aren’t what they were anymore. And certainly they don’t exist in the way that they do without those parts. A dog that has lost a leg may still be a dog, but such a dog is no longer a four-legged dog. In order to be a four-legged dog, it needs to have all four legs. That is, it depends on having all four legs to be considered a healthy, four-legged dog.

So, again, in general, the principle is pretty obvious. If something is made up of parts, it is always dependent on something else for its existence. Even if nothing else, it at least depends on those parts for its existence. But we can go further. Not only does it depend on those parts, but it depends on something to put those parts together to make the thing what it is. As I write this, my wife is cooking dinner (potato soup, if you want to know . . . yum!). But what put all the ingredients together to make the soup what it is? My wife, of course. The potato soup didn’t just appear out of nowhere, uncaused. And, again, the same thing is true with everything you can imagine. Mountains, streams, goldfish, and golf balls were all “put together” by something else. And notice I used an animal as an example there. This holds true even for living things. Plants, animals, bugs, and people are all made up of parts, but something has to put us together. We can say with modern science that natural processes and cellular growth do that, but that doesn’t change the fact that something is putting those parts together just as they are right now. Therefore, we see that not only are things that are made up of parts at least dependent on their parts to exist the way they do, but they are also dependent on something else to bring them into existence in the first place (as an aside, for those with a little scientific background, that’s even true for subatomic particles and the Standard Model of the Big Bang Theory—in those cases, the “nothing” out of which those things come is not a nothing at all, but actually a set of conditions in what is known as a vacuum state. So the principle holds even there, too).

But we can see this principle is true in one other way. If you don’t mind thinking a little philosophically, I could point out that this holds even at the level of what some philosophers call “properties.” Again, let’s explain this with an illustration. A triangle is a three sided figure. That means that it has the property “having three sides.” Now, suppose that property didn’t exist. Suppose that there was no such thing as “having three sides.” In that case, then triangles couldn’t exist, now could they? Or, again, some apples have the property “being red.” But suppose the color red didn’t exist. Then no red apples could exist. Dogs have the property, “being able to bark.” But suppose we lived in a world in which sound did not exist. Then, the property “being able to bark” would not exist, and dogs could not have it. So, in this case, we see that triangles depend on the existence of the property “having three sides,” red apples depend on the existence of the property “being red,” and barking dogs depend on the existence of the property “being able to bark” for them to exist.
So it seems, then, we’ve seen at least three ways our second premise is true. If something is composed of parts, then it is dependent on something else for its existence. Because a thing is not identical with its parts (a car is not an engine; a triangle is not a side; a human is not a heart; a dog is not “being able to bark,” etc.), then things with parts are dependent at least on the existence of their parts, dependent on something else to put those parts together, and dependent on the existence of those properties in the first place.

The Conclusion

From everything we just went through, the conclusion follows pretty easily. Since God is not dependent on anything other than Himself, and since anything made up of parts is dependent on things other than themselves, God obviously cannot be made up of parts. If God is not made of parts, then He is simple. Since He isn’t made up of parts, we don’t need to imagine anything put Him together, which means He doesn’t need a cause (in other words, the question “Where did God come from?” doesn’t make any sense!). We can’t even say that God is made up of a collection of properties, as if God, like a cake, were composed of the right ingredients, only instead of God being eggs, milk, flour, and sugar, God being things like omnipotence, omniscience, all-lovingness, eternity, etc. When we deny all parts in God, we would just say that all of those properties just are God. Strictly speaking, then, God doesn’t have the property of omniscience (knowing everything). Rather, God is omniscience. And He is omnipotence. And He is all-lovingness. And that means, in a way we will talk about in chapter six, that omniscience actually is omnipotence, which is all-lovingness, which is eternity, etc.

If that sounds like too much to believe, just remember that to deny that and to insist that God is made up of parts after all means that He depends on something other than Himself, which would mean that He didn’t create everything, contrary to Scripture. It would mean that He is not self-existent, contrary to Scripture. It would mean that He actually needs a cause—something had to bring Him into existence—contrary to Scripture. It would mean He is not sovereign . . . well, I think you are getting the point. So hopefully, you are starting to see why all those people we talked about in the last chapter thought it was important to defend God’s Simplicity. It turns out that it isn’t just some abstract philosophical construct. We’re talking about nothing less than what God actually is!
Chapter Three: Is Divine Simplicity True?  
A Philosophical Argument: Part 1 – God’s Existence

Before we look at more reasons we should affirm DS with past theologians, it helps to have some idea of how they thought about God’s existence in the first place. To do that, I’m going to spend this chapter explaining Thomas Aquinas’ favorite argument, which we can call “The Argument from Change” or “The First Way” (Thomas Aquinas famously presented five ways in which one could see God exists. So this is the first of those five). The First Way, though, is not the only way people go about trying to prove that God exists. It will help us understand Aquinas’ argument if we compare it to some other methods popular today.

Some Common Arguments

One of the most common approaches these days is to point to some aspect of the way in which the world exists and show scientifically that it could never have come to be that way without God’s involvement. For example, you might find someone arguing that evolution is scientifically impossible. They may argue that even on the most charitable assumptions that the probabilities just don’t add up, that even four billion years—which is how long scientists say evolution had—isn’t enough time for chance, mutation, and natural selection to generate the level of biological complexity and diversity in our world. For instance, some within what is called the Intelligent Design movement look at life at the cellular level and point to very complex biological systems that they argue evolution by itself could never produce (for one example of this approach, see Michael Behe's "irreducible complexity"). These types of arguments are often used by creationists who hope to show that the world as we see it demands a Creator. After all, if we didn’t get here by evolution, then we’ve either always been here or else we were created. But if we were created, then there must be a Creator, which is to say, God exists.

A similar type of argument is often applied to the universe itself. Here, the question is not, “Where did life come from?” but “Where did the universe come from?” These arguments will typically point to the Big Bang other such scientific data to prove that the universe did not always exist—that is, that the whole universe came into existence at some particular point in the past. But that naturally suggests another question: “What caused the universe to come into existence?” Obviously whatever caused it cannot be a part of the universe since the universe did not yet exist, and so it is argued that something that transcends the universe created it. That is, God exists.

Now, the types of arguments I just mentioned are focused on the question of origins, be it the origin of humans or life generally or the whole world or whatever. After all, if it turned out that human life had no origin but had just always been here, or if it turned out that the universe had no origin but had just always been here, those arguments wouldn’t
work. It is very important to keep in mind that although the First Way also looks like an argument from origins, it is not. In fact, Aquinas insisted this argument would still work even if the universe had existed forever into the past and thus had no beginning! So obviously he has something different in mind than the way we tend to argue today.

Let me also say that although I'll be presenting Aquinas' argument, I won't be quoting him directly. He assumed when he wrote that his audience already had a firm grasp on several philosophical ideas that are foreign to us today. So it's really easier just to present his ideas as clearly as possible using modern English and explaining background concepts where necessary. If you do, though, want to read his own words for yourself, you can find them in several places, most notably his *Summa Theologica* Ia.2.3 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.13. I'll also note that some of what follows is going to be difficult at times. I'll do everything I can to keep things easy, but some things are just hard no matter what. I want to encourage you, though, that if you take your time and digest the ideas, you'll get it, and if you do, the work you do now will really pay off in the chapters to come.

The First Way

The first thing I'm going to do is set out our argument in a logical form. After that, I will go back and look at each line one at a time to help clarify it. So in general, we can lay out the argument like this:

1. Some things in the world are changing.
2. Anything that is changing is being changed by something else.
3. But this something else doing the changing, if it is changing too, is also being changed by something else, and so on.
4. Since every such series of changes has to have a first thing causing the change, no such series of things being changed by other things can go on forever.
5. Therefore, the first thing causing all the changes must itself be unchanging; we call this unchanging changer “God.”

The First Premise

The first premise—"some things in the world are changing"—is pretty self-explanatory. Still, there are two points worth making about it. First, it does not say that all things are changing. It says that some things are. You might actually think that this is too weak here. You might be saying, “Some things are changing? It’s obvious that everything is changing!” And on that you may or may not be right. But the problem with that statement is that you have never seen everything. That would just be an assumption on your part, and good arguments make as few assumptions as possible. The good news, though, is that you don’t have to have seen everything to get started with this argument. If you have ever seen anything change at all, then you can attest that the first premise is true.
Second, we're not going to spend any time trying to prove that this first statement is true. I'm okay just asserting it. I point that out because there are actually some people who believe that all change is an illusion. It doesn't matter that we watch our children grow up, that we start and stop at traffic lights, that it is now night and will soon be day, and so on and so on. For these people, all of that is just illusory. We could spend a lot of time discussing the underlying philosophical assumptions of such a position, but frankly (and maybe thankfully) I'm just going to ignore it. One of the things I appreciate about Aquinas is that, despite his philosophical brilliance, he was also a man of common sense, and this argument is one such example of that. I want to follow his lead here. We are interested in common sense realism, and if someone wants to argue that what is obviously true is not really true, then nothing else I say in this book (and, in fact, probably nothing I've already said) is going to have much meaning. But for the rest of us—those of us for whom common sense makes the most sense—we can press on and see what this argument has in store for us.

The Second Premise

The second premise says, "Anything that is changing is being changed by something else." Unlike the first one, this is not so obvious, so it needs to be explained.

Since some things are changing, one question to ask is, "What is causing the change?" There are only three possible answers to that: nothing, the thing itself, or something else. It seems to me that the first two options are impossible. "Nothing" can't cause a change, and nothing changes itself. So it must be true that if something is changing then it is being changed by something else.

Let's look at those ideas in some more detail. Why can't "nothing" cause a change, or why can't things change themselves? The answer to the first is pretty simple, actually. "Nothing" is, by definition, nothing at all. But a nothing can't do anything. If I said, "The nothing caused the sky to fall," then I would be saying that "the nothing" has the ability to do things. If this "nothing" had the ability to do something, it wouldn't be a nothing in the first place. After all, nothings can't be filled with somethings, or else they would be somethings! In fact, I would say it is a self-evident truth that only a something can do things. To illustrate, imagine if you were looking at a pool table and suddenly the eight-ball started rolling toward the corner pocket. Suppose you asked what caused the ball to start moving, and your friend said to you, "A nothing hit it, of course!" You probably wouldn't give such an "answer" any consideration. Again, it is obvious that "nothings" don't do anything precisely because they are not anything.

But why can't things change themselves? I'm sitting here typing these words out. Aren't I changing myself? I'm telling my fingers to push this button and then that one so that these words appear on the page. That seems to prove this premise wrong.

Actually, it doesn't. Unless you are going to say that I am my fingers, then it isn't so obvious that when I tell my fingers to move that I am changing myself. Actually, I am changing a part of me. Any doctor will tell you that the motion of my fingers is really very complex. Neurons in my brain fire off and send tiny electrical signals to the muscles in my figure that cause them to flex this way and that, and that flexing causes the
movement. So really, my fingers aren’t moving themselves after all. They are changed by the muscles, and those muscles aren’t changing themselves, either. They are being changed by the electrical signals they get. But those signals aren’t changing themselves, because they’re being changed by what is happening in the brain, and on and on.

What we find out is that everything that seems to “change itself” works exactly like that. When my dog, Flint, walks from one room to another, he really isn’t changing himself. Again, his parts are moving his whole self, and those parts are being changed to move this way and that by more fundamental parts. The important thing to realize is that none of those parts change themselves. They are always being changed or moved by something else.

There is, though, still a more fundamental reason why we should deny that things can change themselves, and that has to do with what change actually is. In any change you can imagine, you always have three things: the thing changing, the way it existed before the change, and the way it existed after the change. Let’s start with the thing itself. In the example of my fingers tapping away at this keyboard, it’s obvious enough that my fingers actually exist and are changing—first they move here, then they move there, and so on. My finger is still my finger whether it is pushing an “F” or an “R.” Or again, my finger is still my finger whether it is curled up or whether it is stretched out. If I may belabor the point, my finger does not stop being my finger because it changed. What this tells me is that in any change, there is always the thing itself that remains the same through the change. If there is nothing that remains the same through change, then, in fact, change is impossible. All you would have is one thing existing one way being replaced by something else that exists another way, and so on. So if we are to accept the obvious fact that my finger is still my finger regardless of what button it is pressing, we must accept the fact that there is always something that stays the same through change.

Next, I said that all change includes the way something existed before the change. Here, I need to introduce you to an important term: “actuality.” My finger is “actually” in this particular position—and not just my finger. Everything around you is “actually” existing in the way it is at that moment. That turns out to be a general truth: if anything exists (my finger, in this example), it has “actuality” insofar as it exists in its present state; all existing things have actuality.

The third thing required for change—the way something exists after the change—tells us something else about the thing itself. Not only did the thing have actuality in one state prior to the change, but the very fact that it has changed means that it has actuality in a new state. It actually was this, now it actually is that. My finger actually was bent, now it actually is straight. That means that a thing that is actually one way has to have the capacity to exist in another way if change is to be possible. The word we use to talk about that capacity is “potentiality.” So my finger may be actually bent but have the potentiality to be straightened. When that potentiality becomes real (e.g., when my actually bent finger with the potentiality to be straightened is actually straightened), we call that “actualizing” the potentiality—that which was a potential reality has become an
actual reality. Despite all the semi-technical language here, this is really common sense enough that it's been captured by an old joke: "What's the one thing a person loses when she stands up? Her lap." When she is sitting, she actually has a lap and has the potentiality to be standing. When she is actually standing, she has the potentiality for sitting—for having a lap (forgive me for explaining a joke, and for using philosophical language to do it. Two strikes in one sentence!).

Given all this, we are now in a position to define "change." When we say something changed, what we really mean that a thing's potentiality to exist some way has been actualized. Absolutely all change is just the actualization of some potentiality.

If that is correct, then it's easy to see why a thing can never change itself. For something to change itself would mean that it actualizes its own potentiality. But how is that possible? It's not hard to see that something can't do anything unless it is actual. Something may have the very real potential for this or that change, but potential doesn't do anything. A sandwich may have the potentiality to be eaten and stop my hunger pangs, but until I actualize that potentiality—until I eat it—it's just going to sit there and I'll still be hungry, regardless of whatever potential it has. So we say that potentiality can only be actualized by something actual. But this is important: the actual thing can't actualize its own potentiality, either. Remember, change is just the actualization of a potentiality. So for a thing to actualize its own potentiality, for a thing to change itself, it would have to be in both its actual state before the change and in its actual state after the change (since potentiality doesn't do anything on its own!) at the same time. But that's just silly. I would have to be able to have a lap while standing. Or again, my finger can't be both crooked and straight at the same time.

Besides, once again, all this is just common sense. If my actually bent finger has the potential to be straightened, and then that potentiality is actualized so that it is now straightened, who would say that it was the bent finger that caused the straightening? Obviously the bent finger didn't do that. I did that to my finger. I changed my finger. That's the way all change works.

I can summarize everything like this: nothing changes unless some actual thing (not some potential thing) acts on it and actualizes its potentiality. I act on my bent finger's potential to be straightened at it straightens. Light acts on a plant's potential to photosynthesize and produces energy. A baseball acts on a window's potential to shatter and it does (sorry, Mom!). Yet bent fingers don't straighten themselves, plants don't photosynthesize without lights, and windows don't shatter all by themselves. In other words, our second premise is right in saying, "Anything that is changing is being changed by something else."

The Third Premise

The third premise is the easiest of the bunch. We know that some things in this world are changing (the first premise). We know that if anything is being changed, then something else is changing it (second premise). So the third premise just draws the logical conclusion from these two points and says, "But this something else doing the changing, if it is changing too, is also being changed by something else, and so on."
If that isn’t clear, imagine a train of boxcars. In the figure below, there are three cars connected to each other, which we will label A, B, and C. Now suppose you focused on C, and you see that it is moving down the train tracks. Being the intelligent, inquisitive person you, you wonder how it is that such a big, heavy thing could move like that. After all, you see something is changing (Boxcar C is moving, which is a type of change), and you know that things don’t change for no reason and that they don’t change themselves, so you ask yourself, “So what is moving Boxcar C?”

It doesn’t take you long to figure out that C is being pulled by Boxcar B. But that’s hardly the end of the story, because as you look at Boxcar B, you notice that it is being moved too. Again, being intelligent and inquisitive, you apply the same logic to you applied to Boxcar C—you see something changing, so you know something else must be changing it—to Boxcar B. Apparently, something else is changing it, too. You are, of course, hardly surprised to find Boxcar B is being pulled by Boxcar A.

But what, then, is causing Boxcar A to move?

We will actually come back to that question a bit later. For now, I just want you to see that the reason I’m asking it is because the logic is obvious. If something that is changing (say, Boxcar C) is always being changed by something else (say, Boxcar B), then if the something else doing the changing is also changing (as Boxcar B is doing—it’s moving, too), then something else must be changing it, too (say, Boxcar A). The point is that we are always left to ask the question, “So if the thing causing the change is changing, then what is causing it to change?” That’s a universal principle that applies to all change of every kind everywhere.

The Fourth Premise

For the most part, I think the argument so far is pretty uncontroversial and very much in line with common sense. While there is some debate around the second premise (that things can’t change themselves), it seems to hold up under scrutiny. The real weight of the argument, though, and where people tend to get confused, is in the fourth premise. It says, “Since every such series of changes has to have a first thing causing the change, no such series of things being changed by other things can go on forever.”

Now, there are lots of ways this can be misunderstood and lots of ways that people object to this statement, but before we consider all that, I just want to point out why this principle is, again, a matter of common sense. This is reminding us of the obvious fact that anywhere you have a series of things being changed, there has to be something causing all those changes. Let’s look back at our train example to illustrate the thinking.
We asked earlier what was moving Boxcar A. It could be, of course, that it was being moved by another boxcar, and that one by another, and that one by another, and so on. Eventually, though, we thoroughly expect to see a boxcar hitched up to an engine, as in the picture below.

Here, Boxcar B is being moved by Boxcar A, which is being moved by the engine. So we would really say that it is the engine that is actually moving all the boxcars. But why do expect to see an engine at all? Why can’t there just be an infinite number of boxcars all pulling each other? If you’ve ever sat for very long at a train track crossing, you’ve probably felt like that could be the case. But you know that somewhere “up there” there has to be an engine pulling all those cars, and somewhere “down there” you’ll eventually see the last one, the caboose.

The reason you expect to see an engine is because you know that Boxcar A can’t really be what is pulling Boxcar B, and B can’t be what is really pulling C, and so on. Boxcar A is only pulling Boxcar B in the sense that they are connected, but the real pulling is going through A to B, and through B to C, and so on. Philosophers call these “instrumental causes.” Wherever we see an instrumental cause, we have to ask ourselves, “What is this an instrument of? What is using this as an instrument?” In this case, Boxcar A may be directly causing Boxcar B to move, but not because Boxcar A has any real power in and of itself. In fact, Boxcar A is an instrument of the engine. The engine is using Boxcar A to pull B and using A and B together to pull C, and so on; so the answer to our question is “the engine.”

The engine is what philosophers call a “first cause” or a “prime mover.” That terminology makes sense to me. I can ask, “What is the first thing causing Boxcar C to move?” Sure, Boxcar B is helping, but the first thing is the engine—everything comes after that. Or I can ask, “What is the primary thing causing Boxcar C to move?” And here, the answer is obviously “the engine.”

So the principle I want you to see is really very simple. Wherever you have a chain of instrumental causes, you always have a first cause or prime mover that is powering the entire causal chain.

With all that said, there is one potentially serious misunderstanding a lot of people have about this part of the argument. The problem is that there are different types of causal chains, not just instrumental ones. Our argument, however, only works with instrumental chains.
The pictures below illustrate the two types that we are most familiar with.

On the left is a picture of a finger pushing over a domino. As each domino falls, it knocks over the next one, and then it knocks over the next one, and then next one, and so on. Let’s ignore Latin philosophical terms and just call this an A-type causal chain.

The picture on the right is of a girl fishing. Suppose she catches a fish and begins to reel it in. In that case, her hand is winding the reel, which is causing the string to shorten, which is causing the fish to be pulled out of the water. That is an instrumental type of causal chain like I’ve been talking about above. For now, let’s just call that a B-type causal chain.

The most important thing to note about A-type causal chains is that once one event has caused the next, you can remove it from the chain and the effects will continue to happen. If you’ve ever tried to build a complicated domino run before, you know how frustrating it can be to accidently knock one over and watch helplessly as all the rest begin to fall. It wouldn’t do you any good to quickly snatch up the first fallen domino. That won’t stop the rest of the dominos from knocking each other over. The damage, sadly, has been done.

There are many examples of this kind of causal chain. Your grandparents had your parents. You parents had you. If you have children, you had them, and so on. It doesn’t matter whether or not your grandparents are still alive. They started this “chain reaction,” and now it is going to continue for as long as it can. The popular child’s game Mouse trap is built on an A-type causal chain. You might even remember the old jingle: “Just turn the crank, and snap the plank, and boot the marble right down the chute, now watch it roll and hit the pole, and knock the ball in the rub-a-dub tub, which hits the man into the pan. The trap is set, here comes the net!”

I cannot emphasize enough that this is not the kind of causal chain that the First Way uses. There are some arguments for God’s existence that uses them. The Kalam Cosmological Argument, for instance, does. The problem here is that it is much more difficult to show that an A-type causal chain must have a prime mover. Some scientists, for instance, argue that the universe has existed eternally into the past, that before the Big Bang, there was something else that we just don’t know about that caused even it,
and so on and so on. Some philosophers have tried with more or less success to show why that would be impossible, but their arguments tend to get very complicated very quickly.

Our argument only works with B-type causal chains. As a result, the First Cause or prime mover we are looking for doesn’t mean we have to look at the origins of the universe. In other words, B-type causal chains don’t go back in time like A-type chains do. They go “back” in the sense of looking for the root cause (as we saw earlier with the engine pulling Boxcar C through Boxcars A and B). An added benefit of this argument is that it would work even if someone were to argue that the universe had always existed into eternity past or that our universe is just a part of some infinitely large and eternal multiverse (which is the idea that our universe is just one of an infinite number of other universes). Since B-type causal chains have no interest in causes that go back in time, then the age of the universe is completely irrelevant. The only real question for us is, “What is really causing this change?”

The bottom line to the fourth premise is simply that every B-type causal chain terminates in some prime mover and cannot “go back” infinitely.

The Conclusion

If the first four premises are correct, and they certainly seem to be, then it is impossible to escape the conclusion that “Therefore, there must be something causing change which is itself not changing.”

The important thing to see about this statement is that it is not an attempt to prove that a prime mover exists. That, remember, was demonstrated in the fourth premise. By itself, there’s nothing especially interesting or profound at the statement that a prime mover exists. Given the types of causal chains we are talking about—B-type, instrumental chains—it’s rather obvious that a prime mover is required. The question is, why not just say that there are a great many relatively uninteresting prime movers? In our examples, it would appear at first glance that our engine and I are both prime movers of our respective causal chains. Unless we are going to argue that trains are God, this doesn’t seem terribly helpful.

But notice what our argument has brought us to say. The argument isn’t just about the reality of any old prime mover (like me), but is actually saying that there must exist a prime mover that is not changing. Go back to your second and third premises above. If the prime mover is changing, then it must be being changed by something else, right? But if it is being changed by something else, then apparently it turns out that it isn’t the prime mover after all.

Let’s return to our train illustration. We called the engine the prime mover in that it was causing the movement of the various boxcars. But now we have to ask, “Is the engine changing?” As a matter of fact, it is. So it turns out that the engine was not really the prime mover after all. That’s just where we chose to stop thinking about it. But, in fact, the argument insists that we keep going deeper. What is changing the engine? And what is changing the thing that is changing the engine?
Whatever it is that we finally get to, our argument has demonstrated is that the real prime mover is, in fact, not changing at all. In other words, what we have proven is that if any kind of change exists in our world (the first premise), then it is logically necessary that something exists that is causing that change that is itself is absolutely changeless. We'll get into this more in the next chapter, but go ahead and let your mind start wondering. Think of all the different ways something could change, and then say, “Well, the prime mover can’t be like that!” For instance, things that experience time change in that they grow older. So the prime mover can’t be a part of time—it has to be timeless (or to use the old word, eternal). Or what about the very idea of changelessness itself? The old word for completely changelessness is immutability. We could go on, but since we’re going to talk about this more in the next chapter, let’s just take these few ideas and ask a simple question: can you blame Aquinas and other philosophers and theologians for thinking that an immutable, eternal cause of all change in the universe is anything other than God?³

³ I want to highlight, again, the importance of the fact that I’m not presenting this argument for strictly apologetic reasons. Some philosophers have asked the question as to why there has to be only one prime mover. So far, it doesn’t seem that this argument has shown that to be the case. In fact, if we equate the prime mover with God, then it could well be that there are multiple gods. There are good arguments against this, but, frankly, that’s just not an issue I think we need to spend a lot of time on. Theologically, it is certainly the case that whatever else God is, He is at least the prime mover. I’m content for now to leave the question on the table as to whether or not there are multiple prime moving gods, because while I think I can prove there are not, the purpose of this book is to talk about what we know about His nature—specifically, to show that He is simple.
Chapter Four: Is Divine Simplicity True?
A Philosophical Argument: Part 2 – God’s Nature

If the argument I just reviewed in the last chapter is valid, then it isn't too hard to get to a full blown DS. To show that, I want to start by restating something I just said just a few paragraphs back, because it really is the point of the entire argument we just went through, and it forms the foundation of the argument going forward:

Notice what our argument has brought us to say. The argument isn’t just about the reality of any old prime mover (like me), but is actually saying that there must exist a prime mover that is not changing. Go back to your second and third premises above. If the prime mover is changing, then it must be being changed by something else, right? But if it is being changed by something else, then apparently it turns out that it isn’t the prime mover after all.

The fact that the prime mover is not changing—that it is immutable—is extremely important. Remember that all kinds of change require three things: something that stays the same through the change (the thing itself), what something was before the change (its actuality), and what it is after the change (its potentiality, which becomes actuality after the change). If God never changes, though, then the idea of what God might become doesn’t apply to Him. There is no way He was before any way He changed and no way He will be after any way He might change. God just is. To put it in different language, He doesn't have any potentiality. God is pure actuality.

Let’s review that concept just a little further. Let’s start by imagining an oak tree seed. That seed is actually pretty small, but it really has the potentiality to be a huge tree, and given the right circumstances—say the right amount of water and sunlight and being buried in the right kind of dirt—that potentiality will be actualized.

I’m not talking about something that might possibly happen. I’m talking about a real capacity the seed has because of what it is—an oak tree seed. Likewise, there are some capacities it just doesn’t have, regardless of what kinds of conditions you put it in. An oak tree seed will never grow into a pine tree. It will never produce apples. It will never sprout one day and a puppy dog come hopping out. It doesn’t matter what you can imagine an oak seed doing. It will only really do in the real world what it has the real potentiality for. That means that potentiality is real in some way, and that, in turn, means
that we can think of any changing thing as being made up partly of actuality and partly
of potentiality, as in the picture below.

A Thing

![Diagram of a thing divided into actuality and potentiality]

So going back to what we said in the last chapter, change is just the actualization of a
part of something's potentiality. Our seed has the potentiality to become a tree, and in
time, that potentiality is actualized. You could imagine “becoming a tree” starting off
being on the right side of the box and, given the right conditions, being moved over to
the left side of the box.

![Diagram showing change from potentiality to actuality]

So far so good. That's pretty easy. Everything in our experience can be understood that
way, and that's because everything in our experience is actually changing—you, me,
dogs, cats, trees, clouds, the weather, the stars, and everything else. Everything we
experience is an actuality/potentiality composition. But is it all possible that it could be
any other way?

Let's try to imagine something that is just pure potentiality. We could represent it like
this:
The problem is that we can't get very far. Something that is purely potential isn't *actually* anything, is it? It doesn't matter what you put in that box—this "thing" could have the potentiality to be anything you wanted it to be (an oak tree, perhaps). But until it has *some* sort of actuality, it just isn't anything at all; and if it isn't anything at all, then "it" is nothing. "It" doesn't exist. So I would say that pure potentiality can't really exist (if it isn’t obvious, pure potentiality can’t *actually* exist).

The same isn't the case, though, with pure actuality, which we can represent like this:

So imagine something that is what it actually is, but now take all potentiality away from that thing to be other than what it is. Once again, we don't know of anything in our experience that is like that, because everything in our experience is changing (so our oak tree of pure actuality wouldn’t really exist—it’s not hard to think of all sorts of potentialities an oak tree has. It can grow. Its leaves can change colors. They can fall off, and so on). But it doesn't seem to me that there is anything in the concept of pure actuality itself that doesn't make sense. Such a thing just is what it is.

In fact, this is just the idea that Thomas Aquinas has in mind when he argues that the prime mover is unchangeable. *It is not changing because it has absolutely no potentiality for change whatsoever.* If it did—if it were an actuality/potentiality composition—then it would just need something else to act on it to actualize its potentiality. So when our argument shows us that we have to get to something that is unchanging, it is really showing us that we have reached a thing that just is what it is.
and can be no other way, for after all, to be able to be another way is to have potentiality.

From this point on, we can use a very simple argument that leads directly to DS: since God is pure actuality, then anything that implies potentiality in Him has to be denied Him. In other words, if you say something is true about the prime mover, but then on thinking about it you realize that your statement would lead to there being potentiality in Him, you would have to go back and say that it wasn’t true after all. Now I’m going to show you how that works out in practice—what that means we can actually know about God.

**God is pure spirit**

If God is pure actuality, then the first thing we can say is that He cannot have a physical body—that is, He must be completely immaterial, that is pure spirit. Think again about any kind of physical thing you can imagine. The very fact that something is made up of matter means that it can change; it has potentiality. After all, a physical body is either here or there. If here, it has the potential to be there, and if there, it has the potential to be here. Every physical body has the potentiality to be divided up. You can add to bodies. You can take away from them.

Now, if God had a body, then all of that would be true about Him, too. He could move His body this way or that. That's potentiality. You could put His body here rather than there. That's potentiality. You could divide it into parts. Again, that's potentiality. In any case, the point should be simple enough. Any “god” that has a body of any kind—in other words, any “god” that is made up of matter—is not the prime mover, because such a “god” is a composition of actuality and potentiality and so is not pure actuality.

As an aside, at this point, some Christian readers may be wondering about Jesus. He had a body, and He is God! So how do we account for that? For now, I just want to acknowledge the question and promise you that I will answer it in due time. Right now, I want to continue to see what the idea that God is pure actuality means about His nature. If the question of Jesus’ body is just too pressing, you can skip ahead to pp. 74-75, which should get you going in the right direction.

**God is His own nature**

I don’t think most people have a problem accepting the idea that God doesn’t have a physical body. It seems intuitive enough to say that God is pure spirit, so while you might not have quite thought about it like I just laid it out, the end result might not surprise you. On the other hand, the idea that God just is His own nature can be surprising. But before it’s surprising, it’s probably confusing, so bear with me, because we have to look at a few philosophical ideas first to really get at the heart of this one.

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4 For readers thinking about quantum mechanics, see note 5 below.
Start by thinking of yourself. What are you? Among other things, you are a human being. Now, another hard question: what am I? Among other things, I am also a human being. Tough stuff, I know! So another question: if you are a human, and if I am a human, then are we not the same thing? I’m not asking if we are the same type of thing. I am asking if you and I turn out to be exactly the same thing, in the same way that the person who is my oldest daughter is also exactly the same thing as the person who is my wife’s oldest daughter.

Now, I know that there are some religions out there that insist that everything really is the same thing after all, but for those religions, a large part of their religious work is to overcome the apparently very, very powerful illusion that we aren’t really all the same thing. In other words, they spend most of their time trying to convince themselves that even though it is obvious that I am not you and you are not me and neither of us are the sun and moon and stars and so on that, in fact, I really am you and you really are me and both of us are the sun and moon and stars and so on (see, there really are things weirder than DS!). Without worrying about why they are mistaken or what to say to such a person if you ever meet one, I would just point out that since their whole religious practice is built on trying to convince themselves that everything is the same thing, it’s pretty apparent that we’re on solid ground when we start with the common sense idea that you and I really are distinct.

Okay, so no big deal. You and I are different beings. But what do we mean when we say that? Imagine two identical people standing side by side (or just look at the picture below if you prefer).

Those guys look pretty similar. What distinguishes them from each other? It’s not their color, shape, size, dress, shading, position, or anything else like that. In fact, let’s imagine that these were real people and the latter was a clone of the former, meaning that they shared the same memories, had the same personalities, the same emotions and goals and everything else imaginable. Looking at these two, would you tell yourself that these two are, in fact, one and the same?

Obviously not! They’re different entities. But what makes them different? What separates them? Well, you would probably say it’s not too complicated. One is just this particular human and the other is just that particular human, and just because they are
the same kind of thing it doesn't follow that they really are the same thing. If that is what you would have said, then I would applaud you and say you are absolutely correct.

But then I'd have another question.

What does it mean to be “a kind of thing”? I mean, what does it mean to be a human? It's not just a matter of having the stuff you are made of in this or that configuration. Some humans don't have arms. Some have long hair. Some are very small while others are very tall. So what is it that is common to all of us? What is it that actually makes us human? It's not our sex, gender, race, or religion. So what is it?

That, it turns out, is a very hard question to answer, and there is a lot of disagreement on how to answer it. So let me just tell you my own view. I think that what makes us human is the fact that we have a human nature, and that human nature—because of what it is—has certain capacities or potentialities that may be actualized in various ways (is this starting to sound familiar?). In other words, “human nature” really does exist, and it exists in me and you and about seven billion other people right now. In fact, I would suggest that if there really isn't such a thing as “human nature”—if that is just a word we use to describe a collection of properties and behaviors and organs and material configurations and what not—then there is really no such thing as “a human” at all. There’s just my idea of a human and your idea of a human. But if there are only ideas, then who is to say who is right? If the racists of old didn't consider African-Americans to really be human beings in the same sense as the white man, then who is to say that they were wrong? That was their idea, after all!

Well, I'll let you think through some of the implications of that idea on your own. My point is just that, on my view, human nature is a real part of reality. You really are human, and if someone is stupid enough (or immoral enough!) to deny it for any reason (like the color of your skin), then they are just wrong, no matter what their personal ideas are.

So to go back and answer the question earlier, things are what they are because of their natures. You have a nature, and in your case, that nature is human. Trees have a nature. Birds have a nature. Stars have a nature. Everything is what it is and does what it does because of the nature that it has. And those last five words are important for our discussion. Things have their natures. They are not the same thing as their natures. That is why even though I have a human nature and you have a human nature we are not both identical to one another.

So natures are something we possess. And what about God? Does He have a divine nature? If God is pure actuality, the answer, perhaps surprisingly, has to be no. To see why that is, let’s think about angels that ridiculous question, “how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” (This is helpful, by the way, even if you don’t think that angels exist!) Imagine you look at a pin one day and see several angels doing the waltz and decide this is a great time to answer one of life’s greatest mysteries. So how would you go about
answering the question? What would you do? After getting over the shock of seeing angels dancing on a pin, you would probably just count them. And how would you do that? “That’s a silly question,” you are probably thinking. “I would just look at one, mark it, look at the next, mark it, look at the next, mark it, and so on until there were none left.” That’s what counting is, after all. In other words, you would notice that each angel is taking up space. Each one is located somewhere. And such is the case with matter. In the normal world, physical stuff is always somewhere. But what if a thing does not have a body? What if it is immaterial—not made of matter, of physical stuff?

Our dancing angels turn out to be a big help here. Angels, being spiritual creatures, don’t have bodies. If they do appear to us, they certainly appear to have bodies. That is apparently a capacity (a potentiality) they have that they can actualize—they can appear to a person as having a body. And it might be that it couldn’t be any other way, because it might just be a fact that human beings always think about things as being “here” or “there” but never both here and there precisely because everything in our world is made out of physical stuff. In any case, the point is that angels, strictly speaking, do not really have bodies. They are not made out of matter. But in that case, it doesn’t seem to make much sense to say that an angel is “here” rather than “there,” because the words “here” and “there” imply taking up this or that particular space, and if something isn’t made up of matter, then by definition, it doesn’t take up space. So it turns out it isn’t so easy to count how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Perhaps you might see three angels there, but that would just be the angels showing themselves to you in bodily form. There seems to be no reason than an infinite number of angels couldn’t be in such a small place for no other reason than angels don’t take up space.

So, fine, we’ve solved a pointless mystery. An infinite number of angels can dance on the head of a pin. What does that have to do with anything? A lot, actually, because now I can ask you this: if angels don’t have bodies, then how do you distinguish between this angel and that one? Let me go back to something I said just above:

But if we’re both human and yet we’re not identical, what separates us? Well, you would probably say it is not too complicated. I am just this particular human and

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5 I say the “normal” world because, at this point, some readers’ minds might be wondering about the repeatedly demonstrated fact in quantum mechanics that it is possible for the same object to be in multiple places at the same time. Most people are shocked when they first discover that, and they are shocked because such things just don’t happen in the “normal” world. As such, there is major area of research right now in which scientists are trying to figure out why the “weird” world of quantum mechanics doesn’t behave like the “normal” world we live in, and, in fact, they are looking for a theory that unifies the two “worlds.” As interesting as that debate is (and I have my own ideas about it), the important thing to note is that even in the world of quantum mechanics, we can count things—and that whether the thing is behaving as a particle or as a wave.
you are that particular human, that just because we are the same *kind* of thing it
doesn’t follow that we really *are* the same thing.

So what works in the normal physical world to distinguish between different things
doesn’t obviously work in the immaterial, spiritual world. After all, in our normal world, I
am this person and you are that person, and we can see that—we can count that—
because you and I, being particular people, each take up our own space. But since
angels don’t take up space, then we can’t appeal to that in order to distinguish them.

What I am saying is this: in the normal world, we appeal to a thing’s body—its matter—
to distinguish it from something else. Two coins, two rabbits, two clouds, two stars, two
whatevers, are two and not one because *each one* has its own body. They are two
different *things* sharing a common *nature* differentiated by having different *bodies*. But
in the case of angels, it would seem we have two different things sharing a common
nature but not differentiated by their body. So what distinguishes them?

There is only one possible answer. If their bodies don’t distinguish them, then the only
remaining logical possibility is their nature. In other words, what distinguishes two
angels is not that this angel is located here and therefore has this body whereas that
angel is located there and therefore has that body. What really distinguishes them is
that each angel is a *different kind of thing*. Let me be very clear: while there is such a
thing as a human nature, and that nature is common in many different individual things,
there is no such thing as an angelic nature that is common in many different things.
Rather, there are a bunch of different kinds of things that we sort of group together in
our thoughts and call “angels.” There is this creature with this nature, and then there is
that creature with that nature, and still another creature with another *nature*. Those
three things may be extremely similar to one another, similar enough that we may talk
about them using the same word (“angel”). But, in fact, they are different kinds of things.
So what differentiates angels? Not their matter, but their nature. And that means that if

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6 I don’t want to beat this dead horse any further, but let me give one more example if
you are still a bit lost. Think about several people you know. You know and think of
them all as “human.” And yet surely they are all different. They may have different skin
colors, be different heights, be different genders, be different ages, etc. So why can’t we
say the same thing about angels? The reason is that all of those things that distinguish
the people you are thinking from one another don’t go to what it means to be *human*. So
a dark skinned person and a light skinned person are both human. And that, in turn,
tells us that *human nature* is a thing that has a wide spectrum of ways in which it can
appear. One thing with a human nature may be tall (because human nature has the
capacity to be tall) while another short (because human nature has the capacity to be
short); one dark skinned (because human nature has the capacity to be dark skinned)
and another light (because human nature has the capacity to be light skinned), and so
on. But there are ways in which human natures cannot differ. All humans, for instance,
have bodies. If something doesn’t have a body, then it isn’t a human! Theologically, I
would say that all humans are made in the image of God. If you aren’t made in the
image of God, you aren’t human, and so on. But none of that applies to angels.
there were exactly one angel in existence for each human being alive today, (and there is no reason to think that is the case; I'm just using this as an illustration) then there would be about seven billion angelic natures—not one nature called an “angelic nature” that is shared by about seven billion beings (as in the case with human beings and our one human nature).

And it is just here that angels can help us learn something about God. We’ve already seen that matter—a thing’s body—is the way we “count” different instances of the same thing (and we’ve noted that when there is no matter to count, there can only be one of those things; so, again, there may be some seven billion humans but only one of each type of thing we call an angel). But now we can go further. Remember that matter is also synonymous with potentiality. That is, again, because all matter is subject to change. In fact, one of the most basic ways a thing changes is by changing its body. A green leaf becomes a red leaf. A standing person sits down. A rock sitting here is moved so that it is now sitting there. But if you took matter away, you would take away most of the ways in which a thing could change. Something that didn’t have a body couldn’t change color, size, shape, weight, location, or so on. And on the flip side, anything and everything with a body can change in at least some of those ways. That means—and this is important—to have a body is to be subject to change. So if we take matter away from the prime mover (because the prime mover is pure actuality), then all we are left with is the prime mover’s nature. But then the prime mover is like the angels. There is nothing to distinguish “this” prime mover from “that” prime mover. In other words, there is no such thing as a Divine Nature that is shared by multiple things. There is just one Divine Nature (and there you have it, by the way—proof that if God exists, there is and can be only one God!). And therefore that one thing—the prime mover—just is what it is. Strip the matter away, and you are left only with a nature. God, then, does not have a nature that He shares with other things (or, for that matter, He doesn’t have a nature that He doesn’t share with other things). He just is His own nature, much like angels just are their own natures. Humans and trees and cats, though, are not their own natures, for we are all instances of our nature, and we each (each human or tree or cat) are distinguished from one another by our bodies, that is, by our matter.  

Because they don’t have bodies, you can’t have this angelic nature manifesting in this way and another angelic nature manifesting in another way (i.e., one light skinned and the other dark skinned). Each angel just is what it is because each angelic nature is what it is.

7 At this point, let me offer a quick plug for philosophy in general. I just spent about three thousand words explaining what admittedly could be a difficult concept and that could use further explanation still. Yet I can say all that in precisely thirty words if I am free to use philosophical jargon. I’ll show you: “Matter individuates hylomorphic compounds, whereas pure forms must individuate themselves. As matter is excluded from the prime mover, there can only be one such nature, and it must individuate itself.” Feel free to count!
God is His own existence

So far, we’ve seen that you can’t make a distinction between God and His body, nor can you even make a distinction between God and His nature. Whatever God is, He just is. But we can go even further still. One of, if not the, fundamental distinctions we can make in any created thing is the distinction between essence and existence (if you are a Kantian philosopher and are right now pulling out what’s left of your hair, just bear with me a moment!). But if God is pure actuality, then even that distinction does not apply to Him. In fact, we would have to say that God just is His own existence. And since we know that God is His own nature, we can say that God’s nature just is existence. In fact, that is precisely what classical theists said God is: Existence In Itself. How’s that for a mind bender!?\

It’s not as hard to get to the identification of God with His existence as it was to get to God with His nature. All we have to do is draw an existence/nature comparison to actuality/potentiality. Think of it this way. An oak tree has a particular nature—the nature of an oak tree. We saw above that oak tree has lots of potentialities. It can grow, it can have branches, it can produce leaves, it can produce seeds, etc. We saw that there are lots more potentialities it does not have. It cannot, precisely because of what it is, ever think or bark. Some of its potentialities may be actualized. Things it does not have the potentiality for will accordingly never be actualized. So that’s easy enough—in fact, it’s just a review of what we just said a few pages back.

But here’s a new question: what about the nature itself? What actualizes it? When we think about that, we discover that all natures are themselves potentialities, and as such they need to be actualized by something else. That means that every kind of thing—every kind of nature, from angelic to the simplest element—is composed of at least one actuality/potentiality distinction: the distinction between what it is (its nature) and that it is (its existence). Well, not every kind of nature. Since the prime mover can have

8 By the way, that’s one of the reasons that I don’t take atheism very seriously. If they understood what they were saying when they asked for proof of God’s existence, they would see that they are literally asking for proof of the existence of Existence, which is obviously absurd. Existence exists! What atheists are actually suggesting is that existence doesn’t exist as a nature. But that would mean that existence isn’t real, which would mean that nothing really exists. So just like we have to conclude that human nature is just as real as humans in order to account for the fact that we can call different things by the same name (“human”), we have to conclude that existence is a real thing, too, in order to account for the fact that different kinds of things share this in common—they exist. And thus, we see that all physical things are combined of their natures, their matter, and their existence. Spiritual things, like angels, are combinations of their natures and their existence. But for God, who is His nature, He just is Existence.

9 By the way, if you are clever, you can take that truth and use the same reasoning as we used in the last chapter and come up with another proof for God; if you do so, you’ll find that you just stumbled upon Thomas Aquinas’ Second Way.
absolutely no potentiality whatsoever, we have to say that its nature does not have the potentiality to be actualized.

But how in the world can we say that the prime mover’s nature doesn’t have the potentiality to be actualized and still say that it actually exists? The only answer, and conveniently the simple answer, is to say that the prime mover’s nature is existence itself. It does not have the potentiality to be actualized because it is actuality; it is existence. Therefore, it is absurd to ask what caused the prime mover to come into existence. When someone says that, they are actually asking what makes existence exist. So just as our reasoning above in a somewhat accidental manner showed us that only one God can exist, this same reasoning process has also shown us that it is absurd to ask the question, “What caused God to exist,” or the more popular, if less sophisticated, form, “Who created God?” The answer, of course, is that nothing caused God to exist and nothing created God, because God just is Existence In Itself.

The conclusion to the matter

Some of the work above has been hard to get through. We’ve had to wade through some deep concepts. But I think the reasoning is clear enough. If we can say that God is pure actuality, then we have to deny every kind of distinction in God, because every kind of distinction implies some sort of potentiality. God does not have a body, because all bodies are subject to potentiality. God does not have a nature, because to have a nature (rather than to be a nature) is to have a body, which God does not have. Therefore, God just is His own nature. Lastly, God’s nature does not have the potentiality to be actualized. Rather, God’s nature is actuality itself. It is for that reason, in fact, that God can actualize anything else—that is, why He can be Creator and Sustainer, First Cause and Prime Mover.

But if all this is true, then Divine Simplicity necessary follows. A being in whom there are no distinctions is a simple being. In fact, we’ve gone farther at this point than calling God a being. We have seen that God is Being Itself. And within Being Itself there are no distinctions. There just is pure, undifferentiated existence, or as God put it, “I Am.”

It seems to me, then, that for both biblical and philosophical reasons, we have to affirm DS if we want to be consistent and coherent theists. To deny DS is to insist that there is potentiality in God, that there are parts to God, which is to deny that He is pure actuality (and thus to deny that He is the prime mover, as per this chapter and the last) and to deny His sovereignty and aseity (as per chapter three). Yet there are many good, Bible believing Christians, some of them highly trained in philosophy and theology, who do insist on denying God’s Simplicity. Rather than look at the arguments for the doctrine, they tend to raise objections to it. They tend to argue that DS is either self-contradictory (and thus no more possible of being true than a square-circle could exist) or else inconsistent with what the Bible says about God. In fact, as you have read this, you may have had some questions about how if DS is true then the Bible could make some of the claims that it does (e.g., that Jesus, a human, is God; that God changes in many ways; that God is a Trinity, etc.). I would say to them, and to my readers who have such
questions, that first if they are going to deny DS, then they *must* answer the arguments put forward here. And while they go about trying to compose their answers, I would encourage them—and you—to continue reading, for the objections they raise will be handled over the next several chapters.
Part Two

Divine Simplicity: Considering Its Critiques

Chapters five through twelve will present a series of arguments that critics of DS have used against it in recent years. After some general comments about the appropriateness and helpfulness of philosophy in general, our arguments will progressively move from more philosophical to finally explicitly theological and Christian.

This part is the longest of the three and in some ways the hardest. Don’t get discouraged if sometimes the material goes over your head. I’ve tried my best to keep this as accessible as possible, but as you’ve already seen from Part One, the whole doctrine is anything but simple! Against this, our critics are some of the most brilliant minds that philosophy and theology have to offer. While I won’t be quoting directly from them, you can find these objections in the works of men like William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga, Jay Richards, Richard Swineburne, Alfred Whitehead, J. P. Moreland, and a host of others.

My hope is that in understanding these objections, not only will we give due respect to these great minds, but we will come to a deeper understanding of what DS actually teaches, what it implies, and, ultimately, who and what God is.
Chapter Five: Divine Simplicity, Philosophy, and the Bible

By this time, you are probably (painfully) aware that coming to grips with DS requires not only that we understand some philosophy but that we intentionally make use of it when thinking about the God of Scripture. But it is at this very point that a lot of people object—and Christians seem often to lead that charge. Isn’t philosophy (and Greek philosophy especially) merely human reasoning, and aren’t the thoughts of men far below the thoughts of God (so Isa. 55:9)? And further, didn’t Paul say that God considers the wisdom of this world to be mere foolishness, and that God “traps the wise in the snare of their own cleverness” (1 Cor 3:19)?

These questions capture a common idea or attitude held by many about philosophy in general and philosophical theology in particular. At best, the thought is that philosophy is worthless, especially when thinking about God, and so ought to be ignored or dismissed. At worst, it is misleading and dangerous and so ought to be destroyed. Since we cannot turn to philosophy to learn about God, we are bound to turn to Scripture. And further, since Scripture is God’s self-revelation, it is superior to anything philosophy can say anyway. So why would we even waste our time thinking human thoughts about God? Isn’t that sort of like trying to reinvent the wheel—and doing it poorly?

If this line of thought is right, then we may as well forget everything in the first part of this book (some probably would find that a relief!). I doubt, though, you’ll be surprised to find that I don’t think that’s either a very helpful or even a very biblical approach. First, the two verses in question aren’t talking about philosophy at all, much less are they saying we ought to avoid the subject. Isaiah 55:9 is a frequently quoted verse. It says, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” From this, we are supposed to conclude that “human reason” doesn’t apply to God. So does that mean that God acts in irrational ways? Certainly not! Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:33, “God is not a God of disorder.” Of course, God may not actually tell us why He does any particular thing. It has always struck me as probably very important that God never tells Job of the “bet” between Satan and Himself, at least, not as far as the biblical author tells us. As far as we know, Job went to his grave completely unaware of the reason behind his tribulation. But it doesn’t
follow from Job’s ignorance that God had no reason, and the same is true for our own ignorance as to why God would do this or allow that.

So if Isa. 55:9 isn’t saying that human reason isn’t applicable to God, what is it saying? As always, context clarifies the answer to such questions. The NIV renders the relevant portion this way:

Let the **wicked** forsake their **ways** and the **unrighteous** their **thoughts**. Let **them** turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on **them**, and to our God, for he will freely pardon [**them**].

“For my **thoughts** are not **your thoughts**, neither are **your ways** **my ways**,” declares the Lord.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my **ways** higher than **your ways** and my **thoughts** than **your thoughts** (Isa. 55:7-9).

It should be clear that the “**your**” in “**your ways**” and “**your thoughts**” refers to the ways and thoughts of the wicked and the unrighteous. God is calling **them**—the wicked and unrighteous—to repent, to “forsake their ways and . . . thoughts.” Instead, they should seek to do what God does and think what He thinks (as an aside, this is the New Testament idea of “confession,” which literally means, “to say the same thing as [God says]”). So we see that Isaiah isn’t talking about philosophy. He is talking about righteousness versus unrighteousness.

Likewise, we see that 1 Cor. 3:19 isn’t addressing philosophy either. In that chapter, Paul is talking about divisions in the church. Back in verse four, he writes, “When one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere human beings?” The “human wisdom” Paul has in mind has to do with partisanship and competition. Anyone who has spent much time in church knows that we still struggle with this today. “Church politics" destroys churches faster than most anything else. Instead, Paul wants us to imitate Christ and love one another, even considering others more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3-4). Such an idea is foolishness to a world enamored and driven by competition and the need to win. But to God, it is the wisdom of sacrificial love.

Still, someone might point out that whatever specific context Paul was dealing with in 1 Cor. 3, he was still actually quoting two Old Testament passages, and those passages should discourage us from making much use of philosophy. The first passage is Job 5:13. There, Eliphaz the Temanite says to Job, “He catches the wise in their craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are swept away.” But are we to think that God is condemning wisdom? Of course not! First, the “craftiness” of the wise refers to cautious or prudent acts (cf. Prov. 12:16, which uses the same word). And that, of course, is a **good** thing. Further, there are many places where God says we ought to seek wisdom (Prov. 4; James 1:5). Granted, God says that wisdom is a gift from Him and starts in seeking Him, but it does not follow, therefore, that reasoning **about** Him is wrong. And
further, Eliphaz is not disparaging wisdom in Job 5:13 at any way (whether human or
divine). That verse (along with verse twelve) makes one of a series of propositions in
which Eliphaz points out how God “performs wonders that cannot be fathomed” (verse
eight), including giving rain to the earth, exalting the lowly, restoring those who mourn,
and rescuing the endangered and oppressed. The point in all of this is that God, not
man, is in control of all things. Human power, including human wisdom, is limited, but it
is not to be avoided or considered evil.

A similar point can be found in Psalm 94:11, which is the other verse Paul quotes in 1
Cor. 3. The original passage is very revealing. There the psalmist says that “The Lord
knows all human plans; he knows that they are futile.” Once again, the psalmist isn’t
talking about philosophy or “human wisdom.” The entire psalm is a lament, which
means that the author is sharing with God his troubles and praying for vindication. That
vindication is ultimately found in God’s strength—God will restore the righteous when
they are oppressed. So the first verse of the psalm says, “The Lord is a God who
avenges. O God who avenges, shine forth.” There follows a section that details how the
wicked were oppressing God’s people, and in verse eight the psalmists blasts the
wicked for their stupidity, asking, “You fools, when will you become wise?” God knows
everything, he says, including how these evil people plan on taking advantage of His
children. The psalmist thus concludes in the final verse, “He will repay them for their
sins and destroy them for their wickedness; the Lord our God will destroy them.” So it
should be evident that this lament reaches out to God in faith. Rather than attempting to
compete with his oppressors and defend himself (which is what human wisdom calls
for), the psalmist has entrusted himself to God. Once again, then, we see that God, not
man, is in control of all things. So it is clear that Psalm 94:11 doesn’t have philosophy in
view. Rather, just as Paul used it, it looks to human politics and attempts to exalt
oneself over another by partisanship, competition, and brute strength.

So it doesn’t seem that the Bible condemns philosophy at all. In fact, if we are allowed
to think about it—to philosophize a little bit—we’d see that God cannot condemn
philosophy. Suppose there was a verse that says, “Thou shalt not philosophize” (or, for
that matter, suppose any of the verses above meant what critics of philosophy said they
meant). In order to keep that commandment, you would have to say, “Okay, God says
don’t philosophize, so let’s make sure I don’t do that. But wait a minute. What exactly is
it that God doesn’t want me to do? What exactly is this philosophy thing that I’m
supposed to be avoiding?” And now suppose that you start thinking about what
philosophy is.

Guess what you are doing when you ask yourself that question? That’s right. You are
doing philosophy!
It turns out that you can’t *not* do philosophy. The very act of trying not to use philosophy actually uses philosophy. You may as well say, “I never tell the truth,” or “Don’t think about anything,” or “The law of non-contradiction is false.” If you think about those, you’ll see that they refute themselves. After all, if you never tell the truth, then is it true that you never tell the truth? Or if you are not allowed to think about anything, what about the thought that you can’t think about anything? And if the law of non-contradiction is false, then things can be both true and false at the same time, including the law of non-contradiction. But then it isn’t false anymore! (And if you’ve thought about that, guess what else you’ve just done . . . more philosophy!) So the real question is not whether we ought to do philosophy or not. All of us do. Everyday. It is impossible not to. The real question is whether you will be doing good philosophy or bad philosophy.

But let me quickly add here that this doesn’t mean that we ought to throw the Bible out the window and become pagans, as if we could figure out God all on our own. While the Bible doesn’t condemn philosophy or human reasoning, it *does* condemn ideas that contradict Scripture. For instance, Paul says in Romans 1,

> For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. . . . Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Rom. 1:20-23, 28-32, NIV).
In other words, people are capable of looking at nature and figuring out certain things about God. The first thing they can see without needing a Bible to tell them is that there is a Creator. But if God is the Creator of everything, then God obviously is not a created thing. He is not an animal or a star. He is not a storm, sky, or ocean. He is certainly not a mere human being, nor is He a “superman” of sorts, as if the only difference between Him and humans is that He has more power and more knowledge. He is, rather, beyond all of creation. And yet, Paul says that human beings ignored that and in their foolishness worshipped created things as if they were God. We might even say that people made God in their own image. And it doesn’t matter how “good” your philosophy is. If you are lead to say things about God that aren’t true, then what you are saying is very wrong. And perhaps that is a case in which verses like Isa. 55:9 might apply.

The principle that I draw from all this, then, is that our reasoning about God ought to be subject to what Scripture says about Him. In other words, if we look at nature and decide some things must be true about Him, but we then find that Scripture contradicts what we thought must be true, then we need to rethink our understanding of nature—or, possibly, our understanding of Scripture. We just need to be very careful in the latter case to make sure we are not reading out ideas about God from nature into Scripture. And on this point, we can stand in agreement with our critics. We may not, with them, attempt to throw philosophy out entirely. We may not ignore philosophy. But what we can do is take our ideas about God drawn from philosophy and compare them to Scripture. We can ask if our ideas are consistent with or even found in Scripture. But just here we find yet another point of contention. There are some Christians who think that Simplicity fails both tests, that regardless of how good the philosophy is behind it, it is inconsistent with the biblical view of God and that there is just nothing in the Bible that would lead us to think DS is true. I’ll get into some of the major objections regarding the claim that DS actually contradicts Scripture starting in chapter eight. For now, let’s just focus on the question of whether or not the Bible says that God is Simple. After all, if no such evidence is found, then we need to be very careful about affirming it, and even if we affirm it, we should probably say something like, “but it’s clearly not very important, because if it were, God would have said something about it in Scripture. He doesn’t, so let’s not make a big deal out of it.” And in that case, you may as well close this book now and move on. Why waste your precious time on something so trivial?

First, let me plainly say that there is no verse in the Bible that says “God is simple” or “God is not composed of parts.” The closest thing one can find is in Deuteronomy 6:4, often translated something like, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One!” And since God is “one,” some might think to argue that God is not composed of parts. If that sounds like a stretch to you, then I think we’re on the same page. Frankly, this is one of those verses that I think so translated is actually kind of meaningless. I mean, suppose I were talking about you, and I said, “He is one.” Someone would probably say
something like, “Um, one what?” It’s not like anybody was in danger of thinking that you are really two or three! But somehow what is silly when said about human beings is considered pious and mysterious when said about God, and so a lot of people are willing to accept it.

As it stands, I think that’s a bad translation. For reasons of Hebrew grammar I won’t bore you with, I think a much better translation is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!” In other words, Moses was telling Israel to worship Yahweh and no one else, especially none of the Canaanite gods. (If only they had listened, can you imagine how much heartbreak they would have saved themselves in the rest of the Old Testament?!) Anyway, the point is that Deuteronomy 6:4 provides no explicit support for DS. But that doesn’t mean that the idea either isn’t in or supported by Scripture at all. Similarly, there are no verses that say “God is a Trinity” or “Jesus is God.” While God clearly is a triune God, and while Jesus is clearly the Second Person of the Godhead, those are conclusions we draw from what the Bible actually does say. And on those grounds, we see that DS is not only supported by Scripture, but if we are going to take seriously what God has revealed about Himself to us in its pages, then we end up being forced to acknowledge His Simplicity.

I would submit to you, though, that on such grounds that Simplicity is fairly obvious and I don’t have to do any further work that we’ve already done. Remember our two arguments for DS that we presented over the last several chapters. First, we pointed out that the Bible says that God exists in and of Himself, completely independently of everything else. That is, the Bible affirms God’s aseity. But we saw that anything with the property of aseity has to be simple (for a review of the details of this argument, see chapter two). The second argument was that if God really is the Creator, then He has to be simple, because otherwise, He would be affected by the creation and therefore dependent on it in some way. But a Creator can’t be dependent on His creation, which means that God can’t be dependent on us (a biblical fact anyway; cf. Acts 17:25). But a true first cause/Creator that is completely independent of Creation is, again, simple (for a review of this argument, see chapters three and four).

In other words, while there is no verse that says, “God is Simple,” the Bible does give us enough information that we have to affirm DS if we are going to be consistent with those same Scriptures (much as we have to affirm the Trinity if we are going to be consistent with what the Bible does say about the Godhead). Therefore, we have biblical warrant for affirming the doctrine. Still, DS has many critics, so we’re going to spend the remainder of this part of the book looking at them one by one, starting with the most common philosophical objections.
In the last chapter, we saw that some people object to Divine Simplicity because they think the whole argument is too philosophical and not biblical enough. But most critics have a different argument entirely. They happen to like philosophy. A lot, actually. And they think that philosophy itself shows that DS is a rather silly idea. These arguments are especially important because both Christians and non-Christians use them, so we should take these issues very seriously.

At the heart of these objections is the idea that in order for it to even be possible for something to be true, it has to at least make sense. That seems to make sense. But these very sensible people think that DS doesn't meet that test—in short, it just doesn't make sense! Of course, these philosophers aren’t so naïve as to think they can just claim that and move on. Instead, they tend to make a few very important arguments.

We’ll spend this chapter looking at the first of those. It can be stated something like this:

1. If DS is true, then God is the same as all of His properties (in other words, God just is omniscience, and He is omnipotence, and so on);
2. But if God is the same as all of His properties, then all of His properties are identical to each other (in other words, since God is omniscience and God is omnipotence, then omniscience is really just omnipotence);
3. But if all of God’s properties are the same property, then God really only has one property;
4. But God obviously has more than one property, therefore DS is not true.

Now, I think this is a fair argument. The first line is true. On DS, there is no distinction between God and omniscience or God and omnipotence. We might talk about God having the property or attribute of omniscience, but if we are going to be really strict, we have to recognize that on DS, that’s just a way of speaking. As we said before, God really just is omniscience.

The second line is true also. If God really is omniscience and if He really is omnipotence in the sense that DS claims He is, then omniscience really just is omnipotence. Now suppose I described for you three things that all turned out to be one and the same. Perhaps I said the first is a country made up of fifty states, the second is the country between Mexico and Canada, and the third is the United States, how many things would I be talking about? Obviously, just one. Those three statements turn out to be identical to each other. So the third statement of the argument is also right. If DS is true, then apparently God only has one property—a property that we sometimes call omniscience and at other times we call omnipotence, and so on.
And it is at this point that critics think they have won the day. After all, it’s just absurd to say that omniscience just is omnipotence, or that being the Creator just is being omnipresent. Those properties all refer to different things, and since DS makes them refer to all the same thing, it’s just wrong. After all, isn’t it possible to at least imagine a being that knows absolutely everything but that isn’t also all-powerful? So, clearly, omniscience and omnipotence are different things, and proponents of DS are just defending the indefensible.

In response to this, we might go back to our example above. “The country between Mexico and Canada” and “the country made up of fifty states” are really referring to the same thing. And what’s the difference? After all, we could imagine a country made up of fifty states that is not between Mexico and Canada. So we might say that those ideas refer to the same thing (the United States) and so they differ only in our minds, and in the same way, we might say that omnipotence and omniscience refer to the same thing—God—and that they only really differ in our minds. But our critics have a ready response. They point out that even though the phrases refer to the same reality, the properties themselves are really different. After all, even though “the country between Mexico and Canada” refers to the same thing as “the country with fifty states,” the fact seems to remain that the property being between Mexico and Canada is just not the same thing as the property having fifty states. Far from being the same thing, we are asserting two very different things about the same subject. We are saying that the one subject, the United States, has 1) the property of being between Mexico and Canada, and 2) the property of being made up of fifty states. It would be silly, then, to say that “being between Mexico and Canada” means “having fifty states”! And in that case, in the same way, omnipotence and omniscience are also really different properties that are attributed to the same being: God. As such, it is just silly to say that omniscience really is omnipotence.

But before we give in, let’s look at how we might respond to our critic. There are actually at least two ways to respond. The first is to just deny that properties exist at all (at least, not in the sense that our critics are using the word). And if properties don’t really exist, then it is absurd to say that they are or are not the same as each other. Now, you’re probably a bit suspicious of me saying that. I mean, it does seem ridiculous to say that omniscience doesn’t exist. It clearly does, because God is omniscient. So I want to table that response for a moment, because it will be much easier to discuss a bit further below. In the next chapter we’re going to look at a second argument against DS, and in our response to that one, we’ll discuss this idea of properties in a lot more detail.

So for now, let’s look at the second response. First, I’ll just concede up front that it looks like it should be possible for “being omniscient” to be really different from “being omnipotent,” and the example of above of “being between Mexico and Canada” vs.
On this view, God’s properties are distinct from Him and something that He has. Therefore, God has the potentiality to actually have them, and that potentiality is actualized—He is perfected—in having them. But that means He is not perfect by nature, but that He becomes perfect by having these various properties.

Why God’s Properties Must Be Identical

One way of establishing the fact that God’s properties are identical would be to go back to our argument for God’s existence and look at the fact that He is pure actuality. On that argument, we might say that if omnipotence is a property really distinct from God (that is, if we say with our critics that God is not omnipotence but rather that omnipotence is something that God has or possesses), then omnipotence has the potential to exist, and that potential is actualized insofar as God really is omnipotent. But that would mean that God is the kind of being that has the potential to be omnipotent, as well as all the other attributes we say He has, e.g., omniscience, omnipresence, goodness, aseity, etc. Further, it would mean that God was somehow “added to” by “attaining” those properties. That would be true even if we insisted that God had them from eternity past, because that would just mean that God’s potentiality to be omniscient has always been actualized. Of course, if you followed the arguments we laid out in Part One, you can immediately see why that doesn’t work. In God, there is not, and there cannot be, any kind of potentiality whatsoever. Therefore, omnipotence just cannot be a property distinct from God that He
has the potentiality to have. It has to just be what He is, and just so with all of His properties.

I actually think that is a really good argument, and I hope you are persuaded by it. But given the fact that it relies so heavily on our initial argument for God’s existence, it risks being a circular argument. So I want to try to show you another reason why His properties have to all be identical to each other. In this second argument, our reasoning would go something like this.

First, any property that I have either comes directly out of what I am or else it comes to me from outside of myself. So let’s take the fact that I am a male. That comes out of the fact that I am a human. Or let’s take the fact that I have blue eyes. Again, the fact that I am a human means that I necessarily have this or that eye color (barring defects such as not having or having lost my eyes!). But I have other properties that I don’t have just because I am human. For instance, I have a job as a hospital chaplain. That comes outside of me. It is not a direct result of my humanity. Or again, I live in the United States. That also comes outside of me. It is not a direct result of my humanity. Once again, I have children—two of them, actually. And while I can have my kids precisely because of what I am (a human being), actually having two kids is not a direct result of being a human. So, again, everything that I have, I have either as a direct result of being what I am (i.e., a human) or else I have it because what I am makes it possible to have it, and I actually do have it from a source outside of myself. And it works that way with everything that exists. For any property that anything has, that property either comes out of its essence—what it is—or else it comes from outside of that essence.

Second, one of the properties everything that exists has is the fact that it exists. But does existence come directly from essence? I mean, does the fact that we know what a unicorn is (we know its essence) mean that therefore unicorns really exist anywhere outside of the mind? Of course not. So that means that existence comes from outside a thing. And when you think about it, that’s actually pretty obvious. We can say things like, “I brought that into existence,” “she gave it existence,” or just plain, “he caused it.”

“But wait,” you might say, “why can’t some essence just produce its own existence?” And here I would remind you of what we said before. Nothing can cause itself to exist. After all, if something doesn’t yet exist, then it is nothing; but a nothing can’t do anything. So if this thing could do something like causing its own existence, then that would mean that this something already existed. It is self-contradictory, then, to say that something that doesn’t exist is able to do something, namely, cause its own existence!

Third, we apply all this to God. Either His existence comes directly out of His own essence or else it comes to Him from outside of Himself. But God’s existence can’t be given to Him by something else (that is, His existence can’t come to Him from outside of
Himself). If it did, then God wouldn’t be God, and frankly, we’d run into that old question, “What caused God to exist? And what caused that to exist? And what caused that to exist,” on and on forever.

But if something has a property either because of what it is or else because it comes to them from outside, and if God’s existence doesn’t come to Him from outside of Himself, then it must be true that God’s existence is just from Himself. But that can’t mean that He causes His own existence. We saw just above that nothing—not even God—can cause itself to exist. So if God doesn’t cause His own existence, and if His existence isn’t given to Him, then it must be the case that God just is His own existence. Or, put differently, God is just Existence In Itself. Just like the fact that I am me doesn’t come from outside of me, nor do I give it to myself—I just am me—so God just is Being.

And that is profound! God is not a Being. God just is Being Itself. Unqualified, unlimited, infinite, eternal Being. Anyway, there are a lot of theological implications of that, and we’ll get into just a few of them as this book continues. But for now, let’s turn that back to the question we are dealing with. If God just is Existence In Itself, then that means that all of God’s properties are just different ways to think about Existence In Itself. After all, if omniscience is different from omnipotence, then omniscience is one type of existence (or, put differently, existence in this particular way) whereas omnipotence is another type of existence (again, put differently, existence in this other way). Similarly, you and I both have the property of existence, but you are existing in one way—your way—and I am existing in another way—my way. If we both existed in exactly the same way with no difference whatsoever—I mean, if you looked at you and then at me and could find absolutely no way in which we differed—then we would really just be the same thing. But if God just is existence, and if God is omniscient, then that means that omniscience is just existence itself (otherwise, this thing God has—omniscience—would be a “part” of Him, which would mean that God exists in a particular way, having this part, namely, omniscience). And if omniscience is existence itself, then it can’t differ in any way from any of God’s other properties, such as His omnipotence. And that means that “they” turn out to be exactly the same thing. By the way, if you are a Christian, and if those last couple of sentences reminded you of the Trinity, then you are on to something important! If it didn’t, then read them again. We’ll talk more about that in chapter twelve. The point, for now, is that if God is Existence In Itself, then so are all of His attributes, and in that case, all of His attributes are identical to each other.

How God’s Properties Are Identical

Well, it’s all fine and good to assert that it must be the case that all of God’s attributes are really one and the same thing. But does that even make sense? I said that the next thing I would do is show you how they can all be the same thing. To do that, I want to
revisit the idea that God is pure actuality, because on that view, all of this makes perfect sense. It allows us to think about how all of those various attributes are really the same Actuality considered in different ways.

For instance, to say that God is perfect is to say that He is fully actualized. The reason for that is that a being is “perfect” if all of its potentiality has been actualized. A perfect circle, for instance, is one that doesn’t have the potentiality to be any more circular than it is. Look at the pictures below and that should be rather clear.

The left circle is perfect. It couldn’t be any more circular. The one in the middle isn’t quite so perfect. It’s got a bit of an oval shape to it. It has the potential to be a perfect circle, but that potential isn’t quite actualized. And the circle on the right isn’t very circular at all. It’s actually a pretty bad circle. It has a lot of potential that needs to be actualized before it is anything like perfect! And if you are one of those people who are too smart for your own good and looked really, really close at the left circle, found little flaws, and said, “Ha! That’s not perfect, either!” then you only prove my point. Because each little flaw you see just means that even that circle has the potential to be better, that is, to be more circular. But a perfect circle wouldn’t have any potentiality left to actualize. It would just be a circle.

But that wouldn’t mean the circle was pure actuality. After all, the perfect circle still has the potential to be destroyed or to be messed up. These circles are black. They have the potential to be red or blue or whatever. Pure actuality wouldn’t have any of that potentiality. It would just be exactly what it is with absolutely no potentiality whatsoever. And that means absolutely perfect Being (which is what the Bible claims God is and what we saw in Part One that the prime mover or first cause must be) is just another way of talking about God’s pure actuality.

Again, we can think about God’s perfect goodness in the same way. Something is good to the extent that it has being—to the extent that its potentiality is actualized. Take the circles above, and you can see that the circle on the left is much better than the circle on the right, which is a bad circle. In fact, I would argue that evil is really just a lack of good—a lack of existence. Have you ever heard someone say something like, “I wear glasses because my eyes aren’t very good.” That’s because a good eye is one that can see well. And why is that? Because eyes have the potentiality to see, and if they have
some defect that prevents them from seeing well, then that potentiality cannot be actualized. And the same thinking even holds true when we talk about morality. A good person is one who acts like she is *supposed* to act and who does not do things she is *not supposed* to do. Just like an eye is supposed to see precisely because it is an eye and it is the nature of the eye to see, so human beings are supposed to do certain things because it is our nature to do them. And when we do those things, life works better, because we are acting in accordance with the nature God gave us. It is human nature to be kind, to be loving, to be compassionate, and so on. But when we fail to actualize our potentiality to do those things, we are unkind, hateful, and apathetic. A person like that is not a very good person. Of course, Christians would say here that human beings fail to live up to our potentiality because of the Fall recorded in Genesis 3. But whatever theological point we want to make here, it should be clear enough that goodness is directly related to actualizing your potential to be what you actually are.

And if God is pure actuality, then there is no potential in Him *not* to be actualized, and therefore, God is just perfect goodness. God never fails to live up to what He is supposed to be or supposed to do, because He just perfect is exactly Himself, and that cannot change!

And that is why we say that God is immutable. If God is pure actuality, then there is no potentiality in Him to be actualized, and therefore, thought of this way, we can say that God cannot change. God’s pure actuality can be thought of another way as His attribute of eternality, because to be eternal is to not experience time, but rather to have all of one’s existence in one act of existence. But clearly, if God is pure act, then there can be no succession of moments. To be pure act is to just be one act of existence.

Omnipresence can be seen in the same light. If everything depends on the prime mover for its existence (as we saw in our argument for God’s existence)—that is, if everything depends on pure actuality for its existence—then God is causing everything to exist. But that means that every effect, everything that ever has been, is, and ever will be, was, is, and will be there because God was, is, and will be there causing it to exist. In fact, if there is a “there,” then it is only “there” because God *is*. So, again, we see that omnipresence is just how we think about God’s pure actuality when thinking about where any and all effects happen. And it should be easy to see how that same line of thinking applies to God’s omnipotence. God’s omnipotence is just yet another way to think about the same thing—His pure actuality—only in this case, we would be thinking about it in terms of cause and effect itself (even the universe itself coming into existence, which we say God had the power to cause).

The last attribute I’ll illustrate here as just being a way of thinking about the same thing—God’s actuality—is omniscience. Since God is pure being, to the extent that anything exists, it resembles Him. That means that in fully knowing Himself, God simultaneously knows every way in which something could resemble His own essence.
That, however, covers all possibilities (all potentialities, since potentiality is just a type of being, too) as well as all actualities. But to know all things that are both actual and possible is to know everything, which is called omniscience.

What all of this this demonstrates is that there is no reason to think of God's properties (e.g., “being omniscient,” and “being perfect”) as abstract objects that exist independently of God. Rather, they are different ways of thinking about the same act of God. By the very act of causing everything, God can in one way be said to be all powerful, in another way said to be all-loving, in another way said to be all knowing, and so on.

Why the Critics’ Argument Fails

Given all this, I think we are on very strong grounds when we say that God's properties really are identical with each other. But we should acknowledge the critics’ argument that, despite everything above, omniscience just can’t be the same thing as omnipotence. Remember they tried to prove that by saying that you could conceive of a being that is omniscient but not omnipotent, and therefore, the two can’t be the same thing after all.

The problem with their argument, though, is that it turns out that you can’t conceive of a being that is omniscient but not omnipotent, or all-loving but not all-merciful, or omnipresent but not perfectly good. After all, every single one of those terms, if you really flesh them out, imply that the being that has them is pure actuality. Let me just illustrate that with omnipotence.

Imagine a being that can do absolutely anything. There is nothing whatsoever that can be done that it cannot do. Further, that power would have to be unlimited. But if that power is unlimited, it would have to come from itself (remember our argument above that all properties either come from a thing itself or from outside of it?). After all, if power came from outside of the thing—if this supposedly omnipotent thing had an external power source—then its power would actually be limited by that other thing. But if its power were limited, then it wouldn’t really be omnipotent, now would it?

But if something just is its own power, then according to the argument from motion we laid out in Part One, it must be pure actuality. After all, to say I can do something is to say that I can bring about any effect, any change. But remember that if I’m going to change something else, then either I am doing it because I am being changed myself (e.g., something else is giving me the power to bring about the change) or else I am doing it because of what I just am. Since we can’t say an omnipotent being can be changed (because then we would have to say that it got its power to be so changed from something else), then we must say that an omnipotent being has no potentiality.
And that is to say that any given omnipotent being is pure actuality. Therefore, it is really impossible to imagine a being that has the property of omnipotence without also imagining that it is pure actuality. Some people might think that they can do it, but that’s just because they haven’t thought through deeply enough what the word “omnipotence” means. They may as well say that they can imagine a square that doesn’t have four sides! But, of course, all squares by nature and definition have four sides. And just so, any omnipotent being, by nature and definition, is pure actuality.

The same is true for all of God’s attributes. Space won’t allow me to go into each one, but this one example should suffice to show how the reasoning process works. The point is that the critics are wrong when they say that they can conceive of a being that is omnipotent but not omniscient, because all such terms are just particular ways of thinking about pure actuality (as we briefly showed in the section just above). Therefore, it seems clear to me that not only does this first argument against DS—the argument that God really does have different attributes—fail, but by thinking through it, we’ve actually seen more reasons to affirm that DS is true!
If you managed to get through the last chapter, then the second major argument, while actually more important if you look at the volume of literature written on the subject, is actually pretty easy to refute (relatively speaking).

The basic thrust of this line of thought is that since God just is His properties, and since all properties are one and the same, then DS just makes God into a property. But that’s silly, because God is a Person, not a property! Obviously, then, DS is wrong. We can formally state it along these lines:

1. If DS is true, then God is the same as all of His properties (in other words, God just is omniscience, and He is omnipotence, and so on);
2. All of God’s properties are, obviously, properties (in jargon, they are all abstract objects);
3. But if God is the same as His properties, and if God’s properties are just properties (that is, abstract objects), then God is just a property (that is, God is just an abstract object);
4. But persons are not properties (or abstract properties);
5. But God is a person (and so not a property or abstract object), so DS is false.

In other words, if all of God’s properties are identical to each other, then on our reasoning, we ought to say that God just is that property. But how silly is that? God is a person, not a property. Properties don’t do things. People do things because they have natures that have properties that let them do things. Are we really to say that a mere property created the world? Are we to say that a mere property knows anything, much less everything? Properties don’t have awareness. They’re just abstract objects. They don’t love or hate or desire or any other such thing. So if DS means God is just a property, as it surely must, then DS is obviously wrong.

Well, that seems like a pretty solid argument. I apologize for wasting your time having you read all these pages.

Actually, it is a really solid argument. If DS makes God a property, then it is obviously wrong. But perhaps you won’t be surprised if I think this argument is faulty, too. The reason can be stated in one sentence. It will take quite a few sentences to explain that one sentence, of course. But the reason itself is simple enough, and it is this:

Put bluntly, properties just don’t really exist in and of themselves.

Okay, so I know I have to explain what I mean by that. But before I do, I just want you to see that the explanation is worth it. The reason is that if properties don’t exist, and if
God is pure existence, then we can’t say that God just is something that doesn’t exist. In other words, something is wrong with the first premise of our critics’ argument. And if you give me just a few pages, you’ll know exactly what it is. In order for me to explain it, though, this really is one of those places where I need to just talk about pure philosophy for a while. In particular, we need to take a step back and look in a little more detail about this whole idea of properties and what they are in the first place. So put a mental bookmark here at this idea, and then let’s go back to ancient Greece where all of this got started. I’ve been hinting at some of this material throughout the book so far, but here we’re at a point where you really need to understand these ideas more fully. (And, no, I can’t put this in an appendix. This is really important to the overall argument.)

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Discursion

A few centuries before Jesus came along, a guy named Plato (and later, his student Aristotle) got interested in the question of how things can change. He was fascinated by the question of how it is that we can live in a world of things that are constantly changing and yet always staying the same. I mean, it is clear that in reading this book you have changed. Maybe your ideas haven’t. Maybe you don’t think I’m right about all this Simplicity talk. But at least you have changed in that at one point you had not read this book and now you have (or, you’ve at least read part of it). So how is it that you have changed and yet you are still the same you? That may seem like a silly question, but let me assure you that it is extremely important. It is also extremely practical. How you answer that, for instance, would have a large say in how you answer some major ethical questions that are tearing our country apart, assuming you took the time to see how the answers all work together. But this isn’t a book on ethics, so I’ll leave that be for now. The point is that it’s clear than in any change, you have something that is the same before and after the change even though, in some very real sense, that thing itself is not the same as it was. Plato’s concern was how to answer that supposed self-contradiction.
In Plato’s thinking, the form of a thing is an immaterial reality (in this example, Triangle) until it combined with (that is, until it informs) unformed matter. The result is a material thing—in this case, a real triangle.

To do that, he and his students developed an idea that many philosophers today still think is true. The idea is to divide all of existence into two types of reality called “form” and “matter.” Matter is the stuff you see around you every day. But unformed matter isn’t any particular thing. As a matter of fact, matter can be anything. It can be a book or a computer or a person or a dog or a star or whatever. So what makes matter what it is? That’s where form comes in. The form of this particular bit of matter is, say, a dog. We might say that this particular dog is informed matter—matter formed a particular way. This gives a simple solution to the problem of change: matter changes, but the form stays the same. A dog can grow, eat, play, and sleep. Through it all, its matter is changing even as its form remains the same. Everything around you, then, is a combination of form and matter, and change happens when this particular form/matter composite gains this form and loses that one.

A major key to all of this is that forms really exist. They have to. After all, what is something that doesn’t exist? Nothing, of course. But nothing can’t do anything. So if the form “dog” doesn’t exist, then how can “it” inform matter when there is no “it” to be doing any informing? Such an idea is just absurd, so on this view, if change is to be possible, then forms must be real. The problem, though, is that there’s no place you can go and see “Dogness” and “Brownness.” The best you can see is this or that particular brown dog. We never see the forms themselves—just the individual form/matter composites all around us, that is, the various pieces of informed matter that we encounter in our daily lives, which we call “things.” What this meant was that forms are immaterial realities.

But “where” do these immaterial realities exist? That is where the real debate comes in.

According to one school of thought, represented by Plato, all the forms really exist, in and of themselves, divorced from any kind of matter. That means that there really exists a Realm of Forms in which you would find things like “Triangularity” and “Whiteness” and “Humanness” and so on existing apart from any material thing. On this view, the things in this material world “participate” or share in those perfect forms. You might see some white humans lying on the beach. That would mean that the form “Humanness” is

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10 This combination of form/matter is called a hylomorph. The Greek word hyle means “matter” and morphe means “form.” Thus, this entire concept was later called hylomorphism.
informing these different instances of matter—they are “participating” in that one form—such that several human beings exist. Again, the form “Whiteness” might also be informing these humans, such that these people are white. And if they stay out at the beach long enough, they will likely lose their form “Whiteness” and instead start sharing in the form “Brownness” (or “Lobster Redness” if they stay out a really long time!).

Of course, nothing in this material world is really perfect, so everything shares in the forms imperfectly. So you have imperfect triangles and, of course, imperfect people. There is as a lot more we could say on the subject, but this is enough for us to make our point. For these philosophers, properties like “white” and “being human” really exist in an abstract (that is, immaterial) way. To use modern philosophical jargon, they are abstract objects. The really exist in this Realm of the Forms, and they do so eternally, perfectly, and immutably. And if my Christian readers are now thinking, “Hey, that sounds sort of like God!” then congratulate yourself, because that is precisely what a lot of early Christian theologians thought, too.

But not all of them. Another school of thought is represented by Aristotle. He was Plato’s student, so while he accepted his teacher’s form/matter distinction, he differed on “where” they exist.

A sixteenth century painting called “The School of Athens” gives us a good illustration of the debate. In the painting, Plato, an older man, is pointing up into the heavens. He is debating with Aristotle, his young student, who is pointing out to the material world. The question being illustrated is, “Where do the forms exist?” If Plato and his followers think they exist in a type of Heaven, a Realm of the Forms (which is why he is point up), Aristotle and his followers insist that forms only exist in real things. In other words, this second school of thought denies the existence of a Realm of Forms in which the forms exist as independent realities.

The reasoning here runs something like this: Plato insists that things become what they are by sharing in a form. But there seems to be two problems with that assertion. First, how does that sharing in take place, anyway? How does a perfect form “up there” get “down here” and inform this or that piece of matter? Second, if two or more things are sharing in the same form, then neither would have all of the form in question. Let me illustrate. You and I are both human beings. We are different people, but for all our differences, we have our humanity in common. So the statement, “I am a human” is just
as true as the statement, “You are a human.” But what common element exists in the both of them that makes them both human?

By now, the answer ought to be clear. We share a common form: our humanity. So the form “Humanness” is found in both you and me. And that’s fine as far as it goes, but here, the school of thought represented by Aristotle sees a serious problem (actually, they claim to see several, but the one I’m going to share is just the easiest to explain). If “Humanness” is entirely present in you, it cannot be present at all in me. After all, if all of the form “Humanness” is in you, then there’s nothing left over for me to share in. On the other hand, if it is all in me, then there is nothing left over to be in you, to inform your matter. On the other hand, if we both share in the form “Humanness,” then it would seem that the form is not completely present in either of us. It would be partly in you and partly in me. But if that is true, then neither of us are fully human. We are only partly human! Again, remember that your form is what makes you what you are. So if you only partly share in “Humanness,” then you are only partly human.

The obvious truth, of course, is that you are fully human, just as I am. So the form “Humanness” is fully present in both of us. But the only way to say that is to reject the idea that forms exist independently in some perfect, heavenly realm. In other words, we need to reject the idea that there exists a single, perfect form “Humanity” in which all humans participate. Instead, we need to just say that “Humanity,” as a real form, really exists, but it only exists in humans. Certainly, it is what makes you and me human beings, just like the form “Whiteness” is what makes this or that object white. But, again, the forms only exist in real things.

Now, I don’t tell you all of that to pretend to settle the debate between the two schools of thought (known today as Platonism and Aristotelianism, respectively). They have been debating who is right for over two thousand years. What am trying to do, however, is give you a taste of the difference, and all of that so that I can say this: since on Aristotelianism only real things exist—since forms like “humanness” and “whiteness” only exist in real things—then forms are not abstract objects. They are, rather, real, concrete parts of real, concrete things. Put more bluntly, in Aristotelianism, abstract objects do not exist. And going all the way back to our point above, if abstract objects do not exist, then properties are not abstract objects. And that gives us a pretty good segue back into our discussion on Divine Simplicity.

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At this point, to keep you from having to flip a few pages back, let me restate our critics’ argument. We said it ran something like this:
1. If DS is true, then God is the same as all of His properties (in other words, God just *is* omniscience, and He *is* omnipotence, and so on);

2. But if God is the same as all of His properties, then all of His properties are identical to each other (in other words, since God is omniscience and God is omnipotence, then omniscience is really just omnipotence);

3. But if all of God’s properties are the same property, then God really only has one property;

4. But God obviously has more than one property, so therefore DS is not true.

Just before our detour on Greek philosophy, I said that the problem here is really with the first premise. I would ask, is it true than on DS, “God is the same as all of His properties”? It certainly *is* true that “God just *is* omniscience, and He *is* omnipotence.” But is God His *properties*? And to this, I point out that our critics have very subtly misunderstood DS, and what they are doing is called attacking a straw man. In other words, they are misrepresenting the argument and attacking the *misrepresentation* rather than the argument itself. To use a silly example, suppose my wife and I are at the park and we have the following conversation:

Wife: I’ve got to go to the car for a minute. You watch the kids.
Me: Watch the kids? Why? You have to give children some independence. If you never take your eyes off of them, you’ll stifle them. And you know what kids who are overprotected turn out to be like!
Wife: (Rolling her eyes) Watch the kids.

This little exchange illustrates a straw man (and, of course, why I should never argue with my better half). It’s obvious that my wife wasn’t saying to overprotect the kids. I took her argument, made it into something that it wasn’t, and then attacked something she wasn’t even saying. In fact, any time you hear somebody say, “That’s not what I meant,” or “No, I didn’t say that,” you can count on the fact that there’s a straw man argument in there somewhere.

The reason our critics’ argument is a straw man is that, on DS, God doesn’t have any properties because properties don’t exist. That’s because properties are abstract objects, and abstract objects don’t exist. There is no form called “Omnipotence” that God has, nor is there a form called “Omniscience” that He possesses. That means that God is not identical to an abstract property at all. So what is God? He is Existence In
Itself, and Existence In Itself is not a property. It is not an abstract object. Existence In Itself is real, and therefore it does things. Existence In Itself, as we saw above, is perfect love when thought about one way and all-powerful when thought about another and knows everything when thought about still another way and so on. In fact, we can even go so far as to say that Existence In Itself is a Person (or Three Persons, if you believe Scripture)!

But how can pure actuality, Existence In Itself, be a Person? I'll take that as a good segue into the next chapter, as those are the kinds of questions we'll be answering there. Those questions start moving in the direction of theology, so I'll be presenting how it is that Christians have always answered that question (along with others). For now, though, I think we've said enough to show that DS makes sense on its own terms. It is not, contrary to our critics' claims, incoherent. On the contrary, it makes perfect sense, and looking at these objections has actually given us more reason to think that it is true.
I don’t really think that most people object to Divine Simplicity because they are philosophical purists. So while the questions in the last two chapters are important, I honestly don’t believe that they go to the root of why people find the idea so objectionable. As it turns out, I think, most critics don’t like DS because, frankly, they don’t like the kind of God it presents us with.

Please understand that in putting it that way I don’t mean to demean their arguments at all. Philosophers might be quick to point out that just wanting something to be or not to be the case doesn’t have anything to do with whether or not it’s actually true. To go back to an example I used way back in chapter one, I could imagine that my bank account has ten million dollars in it. I could even go write a check on that idea. But I don’t think my bank would be terribly impressed when I complained about the NSF fee if I said something like, “Oh come on! I really want there to be ten million dollars in there!” Our job is to deal with reality, not with what we like or don’t like about reality.

Fine and good, but let’s not pretend with all this talk about being rational and going where the evidence leads that we don’t have some sort of emotional investment in any of this. We’re human beings, after all—not machines. We’re not even Mr. Spock. What that means if that if you say something that I really, really want not to be the case, then I have every reason—or, at least, every motivation—to see if it is actually true. It might be nice to pretend that we don’t come to our conclusions that way. But, whether we like it or not, that’s exactly how humans work, and for reasons I won’t get into here, that’s actually a good thing. It is good to be emotionally invested in being rational, even in being right. It makes us care. The alternative is apathy.

So my point is that I believe that our critics don’t like the idea of God’s Simplicity, so they find reasons to object to it. There’s nothing terribly revolutionary about recognizing this. Proponents of DS have actually been talking about it for centuries. About a thousand years ago, Anselm of Canterbury famously wrote,

> But how are You compassionate but at the same time without emotions? If You are emotionless, then You do not feel sympathy. And if You don’t feel sympathy, Your heart is not torn by sympathy for the wretched! But that is just what it means to be compassionate. If You are not compassionate, though, then how are the wretched comforted?\(^{11}\)

Anselm is getting at a serious problem. On DS, God doesn’t have emotions. After all, if He doesn’t have the potentiality to change, then it is meaningless to talk about us

\(^{11}\) Anselm, *Proslogion* 8, loosely translated (my work).
having any effect on God. We can’t change the way He feels. Even if He had this or that emotion (love and hate, for instance)—which He couldn’t on DS, because that would mean He had parts—then He still could not feel that in response to something we did. That would mean that we are changing God, and therefore, He is not really the first cause after all. So Anselm wants to know, if God doesn’t have emotions, then how can He have compassion on us? And if a simple God cannot feel compassion for us, then how can we be comforted in our pain and suffering? I can tell you as a hospital chaplain that people take a great deal of comfort in knowing that God cares for them. People love the verse “Jesus wept” for a lot more reasons than just the fact that it is easy to memorize.

My point in all this is that these types of objections are very real, and in my view, they are actually more serious than the kind we dealt with in the last chapter. These types of objections are more human. They are rubber-meets-the-road kind of questions. They aren’t philosophical as much as they are theological, and that in the best sense of the word. They go to the question of just who this God is that we say we worship.

For Christians, the arguments here are very clear and very potent. They say, plainly, that the God of DS is the god of Greek philosophy and human reason, not the God of Scripture. The Bible’s God, these critics argue, is in time, changes, has real relationships with His creation (particularly to those beings with free will), and is a Trinity. Yet the God of DS, they contend, is timeless, absolutely unchanging, is aloof and unrelated to this world, neither free will nor permits it in others, and is Unitarian rather than Trinitarian (in other words, they say that DS makes God, at best, One Person and not Three). Of course, if they are right, then DS contradicts Scripture, and whatever one thinks about the arguments put forward so far, biblical Christians may as well just ignore them entirely (or better, work on counter-arguments). And even those who don’t get their theology from the Bible but instead just think of God as being in time, changeable, and other such things, may as well just reject DS, too. For them, all the work we have done in showing what DS says about God doesn’t prove DS true. In fact, for them, our work has the exact opposite effect. It just proves what DS couldn’t possibly be true. All we’ve done, according to them, is show how absurd the whole idea is!

So who is right? Is DS theologically absurd, or is there something more to it that we have to understand? As you might expect, there are several arguments that can be made. In this chapter, we’re going to focus on the first of three arguments that insist, contrary to DS, that God is in time. A timeless God is just an idea that our critics cannot abide. As we’ve seen, if DS is true, then God cannot be in time. That is, for Him, there is no such thing as a past, present, or future. God’s existence would just be a sort of Eternal Now, in which everything that He thinks and is and does is just a matter of fact and not something that happens one after the other. In other words, if God is outside of time, then God does not say, “Hmm, you know, it’s lonely here all by Myself. I think I
would like to create!” And following this thought, God does not say, “Great plan, Me! So let’s create,” and follow that with an act of creation. As you can see, that whole picture of God is full of befores and afters.

But our critics insist this presents a serious problem, because the Bible certainly seems to paint a picture of God as doing things in befores and afters. I mean, the creation account itself in Genesis 1 presents six days in which God first created light and then second created the earth and sky and then third created plants and so on. Doesn’t that mean that before God created the Sun on the fourth day that He had created the sky; and doesn’t that mean that He created man after He created the sky?

From a human standpoint, that is certainly true. But the problem here is that God isn’t a human. The first thing we need to note here is that Scripture often uses language about God to make a point that we can understand, not to make some philosophical statement about the nature of God as He knows Himself. For example, Psalm 18:2 says, “The Lord is my rock.” Does that mean that God is sedimentary, metamorphic, or igneous, or that He is made up of physical elements? Of course not! In the same way, Jesus does not have hinges (even though He said He is “the door” in John 10:9), nor is God a bird (even though Psalm 91:4 promises that “In His feathers He shall deliver you and under His wings you shall have refuge”).

In those examples, Scripture compares God to both animals and inanimate objects. But at times, Scripture also compares God to a human being. For instance, 2 Chronicles 16:9 says, “the Lord's eyes scan the whole world.” Do we really think that God has physical eyes with which He looks here and then there? Obviously not. Again, in Exodus 7:5, God promises to “stretch out [His] hand.” So does that mean that God has a literal hand that He literally reaches out? Again, clearly that isn’t the case. That biblical author is using that language to explain something about God—in the first case, that God knows everything, and in the second, that God was going to act against Egypt.

But there are still other ways that Scripture talks about God as if He were human. Not only does it describe Him as if He had a physical body at times, but it also describes God as if He were acting like a human. So Genesis 9:16 says that God “remembered” His covenant. Are we to assume that God had temporarily forgotten it? Even earlier, Genesis 2:2 says that God rested. So are we to assume that the big task of creating the world tuckered Him out? Once again, Exodus 32:14 says that God changed His mind. What? Did God suddenly become aware of new information He didn’t know before and decide that a different course of action would be better after all?

It should be obvious that all of that is a rather silly way to present God. In fact, all the biblical writers are doing is presenting God in human terms so that we can get an idea of what is actually going on. By saying God “remembers,” Moses wants us to see that
God is faithful to His promises; by saying God “rests,” he wants us to see that it really is okay to stop working sometimes; by talking about God “changing His mind,” Moses means that—contrary to some theologies—God is not into fate. Sometimes, His declaration of what He is going to do is really a warning, and in that warning is an implicit promise that if we change our behavior then we won’t end up in a bad way after all. In that case, the Bible might describe God as changing His mind, but more literally, it is the people who changed their minds, and so they experienced God in a different way than they would have otherwise.

And that gets us back to Scriptural language about God doing this and then doing that. The simple fact is that we can understand that language as a figurative way of describing God’s actions from a human perspective. After all, we are in time—we have a before and an after—so we don’t know what it is like to be timeless. The only way for us to describe God acting is to use temporal language. But don’t confuse human language written from a human perspective with scriptural claims about what God really is in and of Himself beyond that human perspective. We would do well to remember C. S. Lewis’ point, as he wrote from the perspective of an older demon teaching a younger demon about the “dangers” of allowing a Christian to pray:

Whatever the nature of the composite object [a person has created to represent God], you must keep him praying to it—to the thing that he has made, not to the Person who has made him. You may even encourage him to attach great importance to the correction and improvement of his composite object, and to keeping it steadily before his imagination during the whole prayer. For if he ever comes to make the distinction, if ever he consciously directs his prayers “Not to what I think thou art but to what thou knowest thyself to be”, our situation is, for the moment, desperate. Once all his thoughts and images have been flung aside or, if retained, retained with a full recognition of their merely subjective nature, and the man trusts himself to the completely real, external, invisible Presence, there with him in the room and never knowable by him as he is known by it—why, then it is that the incalculable may occur. In avoiding this situation—this real nakedness of the soul in prayer—you will be helped by the fact that the humans themselves do not desire it as much as they suppose. There's such a thing as getting more than they bargained for!

In short, if God really is eternal and timeless, then we should not be surprised when Scripture describes Him and His actions in temporal language—in terms of “before” and “after.”

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But, of course, our critics are far too clever to put all the eggs in that one basket. They think that they have two very powerful arguments showing that God has to be in time, the first of which I’ll deal with now, and the second in the next chapter. The argument goes something like this: because we live in a temporal world (that is, a world with time), some things are only true with respect to the past, present or future. These are called “tensed facts.” For instance, if I say, “It is now evening,” that fact has a tense: the present tense. It is only true if it is, in fact, evening right now, in the present. But if I say that at another time, perhaps when it is morning, then the fact is not true. Another example might be, “I was born over thirty years ago.” Today, I can say that it is true. But had I said that a few years ago (in the past), it would have been false. A final example might be, “Next year will be 2016.” Again, that is true as I write this, but soon enough it will not be a true statement. In other words, we see that some facts are true or false based on their relationship to time—that is, based on their tense (past, present, or future).

The second point in the argument is that the only way for God to know tensed facts is for Him to be in time. After all, if He were not in time, then He could not say if something is true now or will be true tomorrow or was true yesterday. Words like “now,” “tomorrow,” and “yesterday” don’t mean anything to a timeless God. But obviously God knows everything, so it would be absurd to say that God just doesn’t know tensed facts. I mean, God knows that tomorrow will be Tuesday, doesn’t He? But if He knows that tomorrow is Tuesday, that means that He has to exist today—that for God it has to be Monday—and that tomorrow will be Tuesday, even for Him. That is, the only way for God to know tensed facts is to be in time Himself. And since God knows everything, then obviously, God is in time.

The problem with this argument, though, is that it just isn’t true after all that God can’t know tensed facts unless He Himself is in time. In other words, there’s no reason that a timeless God cannot know a tensed fact. Let me explain it with an analogy. Take these two sentences:

George Washington cannot tell a lie.

I cannot tell lie.

Let’s assume, you myth-busters out there, that the first sentence is true. Does God know that fact? Of course. But suppose George Washington himself is speaking the second sentence and notice the change. Both sentences are about George Washington, but the first sentence is from an “outsiders” perspective whereas the second sentence is George’s own internal perspective. Clearly God knows the outsider’s perspective. God can say with certainty, “George Washington cannot tell a
lie.” But the problem comes if we ask if God knows the same fact from George’s internal perspective? Can God say, “I cannot tell a lie?”

Now, clearly, it is true that God can say, “I cannot tell a lie.” But the problem is when God says it and when George says it, we are now talking about two different facts. So it seems that we cannot say that God knows George’s honesty from George’s internal perspective. Rather, God knows George’s honesty objectively, from the outsider’s perspective. And the same is true with every single fact that every single one of us knows from an internal perspective.

But would anyone say that because God does not know a particular fact from a particular perspective that therefore God does not know everything? I would hope not! Omniscience doesn’t have to do with how we know what we know, but that we know what we know. And the exact same thing is true with reference to tensed facts. I may say right now, “It is evening,” and the present tense means that I am saying it is evening right now. I have to talk that way because I am a temporal being. God can just as well know that, “For Chris, at this moment in his history, it is evening.” That no more effects God’s omniscience then the fact that God cannot “know” my internal perspective in saying, “I am thirty-three years old.” The bottom line is that God can know tensed, temporal facts. He knows them from the perspective of tensed, temporal beings. In fact, because God is omniscient, He knows all perspectives simultaneously. He knows every possible perspective. He knows which of those perspectives are true relative to each individual being and which are false. He also knows which are true and false in and of themselves. He just knows everything. So there is no reason to think that this argument from “tensed facts” means that God has to be in time. And our analogy proves more. If critics insist that this is not good enough, that God knowing tensed facts from the perspective of tensed beings is not enough to say that God knows everything, then they equally have to say that God’s failure to know facts from our internal perspective means that God doesn’t know everything. In short, their argument “proves too much.” Given all that, this argument just doesn’t prove that God is in time.

Now beyond all of that, I think that there is a very good reason, even outside of a commitment to DS, to think that God isn’t a temporal being. If God is in time, then His past no longer exists. That, however, would mean that God does not enjoy all of His life at once. Instead, He only enjoys part of it at a time—just like we do—and that seems to contradict His perfection. Think, for a moment, of a very happy memory in your own life. Wouldn’t it be nice to go back and live that again? You can remember it, of course, but
no matter how well you remember it—even if you remembered it extremely vividly—it still would not change the fact that what you were experiencing was a mere memory and not the event itself. The point is that there is a difference in actually living out something and remembering that something, and a memory, by nature, is always just an echo of the reality itself. No matter how good the recall, it doesn’t quite have the sweetness of the real thing. But if that’s true of your memories, why wouldn’t it be true of God’s, too? No matter how sweetly He remembered your salvation, for instance, it would only be a memory. Not even God could truly live that again. So the problem is that, on this view, God is literally lacking something: the presence of His own past! Regardless of how problematic that feels, the fact is, it proves definitively that a temporal God necessarily lacks something in this present. But a God who lacks something is not, by definition, perfect. He is missing something. It’s also important to remember that if it possible for something to not exist, then that thing, by definition, is unnecessary (since necessary things can’t stop existing). But if God is in time, then part of Him (His present) is continuously going out of being (as it passes), which means that God Himself is not necessary! If, then, someone is going to tell us that God is in time, then I say they had better have some very strong reasons for rejecting God’s absolute perfection and necessity. The arguments we’ve seen so far don’t seem to come anywhere near that, at least not as far as I can tell.
Chapter Nine: Objections to Divine Simplicity
God’s Relationship to the World

Last chapter we looked at the relationship between God and time. The next objection is closely related, and I think it is much stronger. In this chapter, we’ll look at God’s relationship with the world more generally, because if our critics are right, then they’ve found another way to show that God is actually in time and therefore that DS is false.

For this argument, we go back to the fact that Christians and other such faiths claim that God is really active in the world. In other words, God is actually doing things. Before, we said that wasn’t enough to show that God is in time because such language can be understood to be metaphorical. But critics of DS press the point in another direction.

First, they say that the moment God does anything in the world—the moment He causes an effect—He establishes a relationship with the world, with the effect. When God created the world, for example, the relationship He established was that of Creator to creation. Christians believe that Jesus saves us from our sins, so the moment Jesus saves Mary God establishes a relationship with her as Savior to saved. I’m sure you could think of dozens of examples of this kind of thing.

It’s tempting at this point to claim that the establishment of the relationship itself is a change—a before and after—so that God has to be in time. After all, before God created the world, He wasn’t its Creator, was He? And after God created the world, He was its Creator. The same could be true about any effect God brings about, from saving you to causing the sun to rise each morning. But that’s actually not the direction more serious critics of DS go. The reason is that they know that if God is outside of time, then we wouldn’t say that God changed at all. We would say that God, from eternity—that is, from outside of time—has just “always” willed that a particular event would happen at a particular point in time. So much like an author might decide to introduce a character on page thirty-seven and then get rid of him on page thirty-eight (obviously not the main character we’re talking about here), God just says that at this particular time this particular thing will happen. That wouldn’t mean that God has to be “in time” any more than our author would have to be a part of her book.

The actual argument our critics want to make is much better. Rather than focusing on the fact of the event and arguing for a change from that (e.g., God saved Mary, and in doing so changed from not being her Savior to being her Savior), they focus on the relationship God establishes the moment He brings about an effect. And if that relationship is temporal, then it follows that God is temporal, too, insofar as His relationship is constantly changing.
So let me illustrate that to clarify what they are saying. Suppose I move a ball from here to there. Several things are obvious in this change, the first being that my hand and the ball moved from here to there. That is, their positions changed. Any such change is, of course, something that happens in time. But the more important observation is the relationship between my hand and the ball. What I want you to focus on specifically is the fact that it is my hand that is doing the moving. Put differently, the relationship is one of cause and effect. If the effect is the ball’s movement, its cause is my hand. In other words, I have a real relationship with the ball, and that means that if the ball changes, then my relationship with the ball changes, too. But if my relationship changes, then I’ve changed in some sense, which means that I am in time.

In fact, you don’t even need me to move the ball for this argument to hold. Suppose I was just holding it, and while I was holding it, the ball suddenly turned blue. Questions of magic tricks aside, the important thing to notice here is that it isn’t just the ball that changed. In some sense, I changed, too. I went from holding a black ball to holding a blue ball. Since the ball changed, my relationship to the ball changed. And if my relationship changed, then there is a real before/after in me, which means that I have to be a temporal being.
Again, it's easy to come up with hundreds of examples of these kinds of changes. Right now, I have two daughters. One is five and the other is almost two. In a year from now, one will be six and the other almost three, which means that not only will I be a year older, but I'll be the father of a six and a three year old (which is different from being the father of a five and two year old). My wife isn't terribly tall, so it isn't hard to imagine the day when one (or both!) or our little girls will be taller than her. She isn't going to be getting any taller or shorter any time soon, but the day one of them gets taller than her, at least her relationship with them will have changed. You can even make these sorts of observations about very mundane things. Right now I might be standing to the left of a column, and then I could walk around to the other side and be standing to its right. In one sense, the column isn't changing at all. It's just being a column. But in another sense, the column is changing, since my relationship to it and its relationship to me is changing. If we did manage to come across a column that was truly outside of time, then I couldn't at one moment be to its left and at another be to its right. (So in fact it would seem that I could never “come across” a column that was truly outside of time!)\footnote{At this point, some of you may notice that the changes I am talking about are referred to as Cambridge changes, the idea being that a change in a thing's extrinsic properties in no way constitutes a real change to the thing itself. In light of this, some might argue that all these examples fail to show real change. But for our purposes, it is enough to show that if two things have a real relationship, then even a Cambridge change results at least in a change in that relationship. And it would seem that even a change in relationship is enough to say that a thing is in time. After all, how could something outside of time experience any kinds of changes in its relationships to other things?}
Now, if you followed all that, then it should be pretty easy to see how our critics apply this line of thought to God’s relationship to us and therefore His relationship to time. Put simply, they argue that God has a real relationship with us (He is our Creator, Sustainer, He knows us, He answers our prayers, etc.), and since we are changing, then God’s relationship to us is constantly changing; therefore, God is in some sense constantly changing, which is to say that He is in time. And if I could just be a little bit more technical, I would point out that, so far as the argument goes, it is actually correct. The term some philosophers—especially proponents of DS—use to describe our relationships to other things is an “accident.” Think of an accident as something that is part of what we are, but something that could change without destroying what we are. So I am a human being. That is my essence. When I change, my essence doesn’t; my accidents do. My eye color is, in this sense, an accident. It happens to be blue, but it could have been brown. My height, weight, ethnicity, language, and other such things are all accidents. They change. They could have been different than they are. But no matter how different they are, none of that changes my essence. I am still a human being. And if all that is clear enough, then, it should be easy to see that my relationship to other things is accidental, too. It can change without changing what I am (a human being). From that, it’s easy to see the critics’ charge that God clearly has accidental properties in that He is related to His creation. They say as creation changes, God’s accidental property of being related to us changes; so because that accidental property is part of Him, He changes. He doesn’t stop being God any more than a change in height means I am no longer a human. His very essence is divinity. But His accidents change, which means He changes, all of which means He is in time.

As far as I can tell, the only way to avoid the conclusion that God is in time is to reject the claim that He is really related to us at all. Remember that what makes this argument so potent is that it is rooted in the apparent fact that God is in a real relationship with His creation. But if there is no such relation, then changes in creation don’t require any changes in God, meaning God does not have to be in time.

As a matter of fact, that is exactly what proponents of DS have always insisted. God is not really related to creation after all. If that sounds like a reaction to the argument above, rest assured that theologians have actually been saying this for centuries—long before this argument was ever proposed. It follows directly out of the original logic for simplicity. Remember that on our view, God is pure actuality, which means that in Him there is no potentiality at all of any kind. If that is true, though, then God cannot stand in any real relations with anything else. In philosophical jargon (feel free to snooze for the next couple of sentences), that’s because all relations are grounded in accidents (indeed, relations themselves are necessarily accidental), but a simple being is not composed of substance and accidents; it is, rather, pure essence. Therefore, having no accidents, such a being stands in no real relations.
So much for jargon. What does that *mean*? Let’s go back to our illustration at the beginning of chapter four where saw this picture:

![Illustration of two similar figures](image)

Back then, we noticed that these two fellas are pretty similar. In fact, there is nothing really to distinguish them except for the fact that the one on the left is *this* guy and the one on the right is *that* guy. But rather than asking what makes them different, now I want to ask you, what makes them so similar? They’re both wearing hats. They’re both the same size. They’re both the same shape. They’re both on the same page. Things like that. But notice that any time you say “They’re both *so and so*,” the “so and so” always refers to something the two have in common. And that means that each of the things being compared *has* that particular something. Each one *has* a hat. Each one *has* a particular size and shape. Each one *has* a place on the page, and so on. But if you have something, then that something is not you. Those cowboys are not hats. They are cowboys *who have* hats, and so on with all the other examples. In fact, you could get deeper and say that both are (pictures of) people—they have their humanity in common. But, again, we see the same holds true. They *have* their humanity. Neither *are* humanity (as we discussed back in chapter four). If you wanted to get *really* deep, you could say the same thing about their being. Each one *has* being and so can be compared. But neither *is* Being Itself. (Note: that’s a hint to where we’re going with this!)

That means that any time two things are related to each other, they are *always* related based on something they *have*, either in having those properties in common or being different in not having those properties (so a cat and dog are related in that one has a feline nature and the other has a canine nature; but neither are feline nature itself or canine nature itself). Yet if our argument for DS was right in the first part of this book, then we can’t say that God has anything that is not Himself. Since He just is Being Itself, then God doesn’t *have* anything that we can compare with. Neither does He *not* have anything, as if He were lacking something. Remember, after all, He is perfect and the cause of everything. And all this, by the way, makes one of the wonderful devotional points in all of this dreary philosophical theology. God is really nothing at all like anything you know. He’s so unlike everything that you can’t even say He’s not like this or that, because even *that* requires comparing the this or that with something He has. It
turns out God really meant what He said in Isaiah 40:25: “To whom then will you compare me that I should be like him?” (ESV) In fact, I would encourage you to spend some serious time in prayer and meditation on this topic. The moment you think you know what God is, you’ve misunderstood Him, because to know what God is—to say that He has this or that property that you can fathom—is to deny His Simplicity, which is to deny His deity (since only a simple being can be the first cause as we saw in the first part of this book)!

So fine, we know that God can’t really be related to the world after all. But how can that be? Clearly, God does act in this world. So how does that not create a real relationship? That’s important to know, because if we don’t answer that, then you could actually create the mother of all arguments against DS: if DS means God can’t be in a real relationship to anything else, and if to effect the world is to be in real relationship with it, then DS would seem to mean that God can’t do anything in this world. Yikes!

To answer this, we have to know that there are three different kinds of relations: a real relation, a conceptual or logical relation, and a mixed relation. A real relation is what we’ve been talking about all along. That happens when two things share something that they have in common (or, alternatively, they contrast in that one lacks something the other has; so a rock can be related to a person in that a person can see and a rock can’t). The second type is a conceptual or logical relation. In this case, there is no real relationship. It only exists in our mind. Take the sentence, “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” What is the difference in a “bachelor” and “an unmarried man”? In reality, “they” are exactly the same thing. There are not two things after all. There is just one. Since the distinction between the two isn’t real—it is only in our mind—then the relation between them isn’t real either.

Let me pause for just a moment, because the language here might be a bit misleading. When I say the relationship between “bachelor” and “unmarried man” isn’t “real,” I am not saying that it is “fake,” and I am certainly not saying that it is “non-existent.” When I say it is not “real,” I mean that the relationship (which is real) is rooted in our mind; it is not rooted in external reality, something outside of the mind. Another example might be when I say, “Unicorns do not exist.” Here, I am comparing unicorns to non-existent things. But how can non-existent things have any properties at all? They obviously can’t. What is happening is that I’m creating a distinction that isn’t real outside of my mind to make a comparison. The same type of reasoning can be applied to when I say that something is a particular type of thing, as when I say, “My dog is a beagle.” Once again, are there two different things in reality that are being compared, or is my mind creating a distinction to compare the two?

If that’s clear, then we’ve seen that sometimes a relationship is real—both things can be compared by some quality they possess or lack. Sometimes a relationship is logical—
“both” things can be compared, but the basis of comparison is in the mind. Lastly, sometimes a relationship is mixed. On one side of the relationship equation the relation is real, but on the other side it is logical only. For example, there are people I know who don’t know me (ask any high school boy what it’s like when the girl he’s in love with pays him any attention!). Suppose I know John. I have a real relationship with him—the relationship is rooted in something outside of my mind: John himself and my knowledge of him. But if John doesn’t know me, then his relation to me is only conceptual. He is related to me insofar as “John is known by me.” But that statement isn’t really saying anything about John at all, is it? It’s talking about me, and there we are back to my real relation with him. So we talk about John’s relation to me in logical terms only. He is related to me in my mind only, not in reality—the mental construct being, “known by me.”

What proponents of DS say is that God and the world are related in the third way. We are really related to Him. It is true in reality—not just in our mind—that we were created by Him. But God is not really related to us. On His side of the equation, the relation is only logical. After all, as we saw above, real relationships are always rooted in something that two things have, but a simple being doesn’t have anything; He just is Being Itself. Logically, we have to say that God created us. But that is saying something more about us that it is about God—namely, that we are created things.

But wait a minute! Are we really saying that God didn’t really create us then? In an important sense, that is what we’re saying (don’t stop reading! I’ll clarify). You can’t imagine God being “over there” and then creating us “over here,” as if there were some “space” between us that we can compare ourselves to. Before creation, there really was nothing. There really wasn’t a here or there. In fact, to be technical, there’s no such thing as “before” creation, because “before” refers to time, and time was created with creation. So all that means that God doesn’t stand “beside” creation as something compared to it. I’m afraid that a lot of us picture creation, though, like that. God is “here,” and “after” creation, God is still “here” and creation is “over there.”

It just doesn’t work like that, though, and if that is what we mean when we ask if God really creates us, then, no, God doesn’t do that. What is really the case is that creation came into existence. God isn’t “here” or “there.” He just “is.” And because He is, we are. And notice that word “because” in that last sentence. It is just there that you have the doctrine of creation. God causes us to be, because of what He is—Being Itself. And in that sense, God really did create us. Understood this way, the word “Creator” doesn’t

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14 This isn’t to say that I am only related to John by a mixed relationship. As it happens, I am really related to him in many ways. For instance, we are both humans. That’s a real relation. My only point is that some relations are mixed, and in this respect, my relation with John is a mixed one.
refer to some property that God has. It just refers to His essence, but here, it refers to His essence as we understand it compared to ourselves in a particular way. So just like before we found out that all of God’s attributes are just different ways of thinking about His same nature, the same thing turns out to be true with regard to Him as Creator. That’s just thinking about His single essence with respect to our own existence—an existence that is really dependent on Him!
Chapter Ten: Objections to Divine Simplicity
God’s Relationship to the Change and Freedom

If the last chapter didn’t hurt your head too much, I want to look at one last argument related to the question of God’s relationship to time and change. Thankfully, this one isn’t quite so heavy, so this discussion should be fairly brief. This argument for God’s temporality is rather straightforward. We could phrase it this way:

1. That which changes in any way is in time;
2. There are ways that God changes;
3. Therefore God is in time;
4. That which is in time is not simple;
5. Therefore, God is not simple.

The difference in this argument and the first two is that this one starts with the claim that God changes and from there says that He must be in time. The other arguments reversed that. They said that God is in time, and therefore He changes. But it’s a lot easier to ask whether or not God changes at all. So what do they have in mind?

Consider the following claims: God answers our prayers. God becomes angry or offended when we sin. God blesses the obedient. God rejoices with us in our joys and weeps with us in our sorrows. God cares deeply for all of creation, especially humans.

Who could doubt these claims? They seem obviously true, especially to the Christian. But our critics point out that these sorts of claims require God to change. In answering our prayers, God changes what He was doing and does something else on our behalf. Think of the story of Jonah. God had declared that He was going to destroy Nineveh, but they repented, and because of that, God changed His mind and decided not to destroy them after all. Jonah 3:10 records this change saying, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened” (NIV).

The same type of change seems evident in God’s emotional responses to what we do or what we are going through. If God is affected by us or by what happens to us—if something in our life makes Him happy or sad, for instance—then God is changed. He was feeling one way and then He began feeling another. In fact, the whole idea of God caring about creation, and people especially, implies that God is constantly changing. Is God not delighted at every perfect sunrise and saddened when His creatures suffer? If He cares, is He not affected by His creation? And if He is affected, then does that not disprove this whole idea about Him being the first cause (and therefore, totally unaffected and unchanging)? And wouldn’t that mean that Simplicity just isn’t true?
If nothing else, I want you to know that of all the objections against DS, this is the one that I think is the most potent. It is the most serious because we have an emotional investment in how we answer it. It is so powerful because it goes to our assumption about who and what God is, about what kind of being or thing He is. None of us have really seen God directly, so He is the ultimate blank canvas. Psychologically, we tend to attribute to Him the best of what we love (or the worst of what we hate, in some cases). In the language of Jungian psychology, we project on Him all that we want to be and deny Him all that we push into our “shadow,” which is all that we don’t want to be and refuse to admit that we are. In many ways, we actually make God into our own image. And DS, above all, destroys that. For whatever God is, He is certainly not human!

In short, this objection gets down to two irreconcilable pictures of God. One—the one we are most comfortable with, I think—paints Him as a Cosmic Superman, an all-powerful creature that knows everything and can do anything and is loving and just and righteous and all the rest. He is different from us by matter of degree. We have power. So does He, only He has more of it. We have knowledge. So does He, only He has more of it. We love. So does He, only He does more, and so on. The other view of God says that He is not a creature at all, cosmic or super. He is not even a being. He just is Being Itself. He does not have power. He is power. He does not have knowledge. He is knowledge. He does not have love. He is love. But what does that even mean, that God is knowledge and power and love? And what good is it to say that God is love if I can’t say that God is affected by me or what I’m going through? These questions are so serious that the only really new philosophical development (in my opinion anyway) over the past two thousand years came out of them!15

In any case, I’m convinced that as important and central as these questions are, there are several good answers to them. First, as a Christian, I would point you to Christ. In the Incarnation, God took on a human nature—that is, He became a man.16 And in

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15 For the curious, I’m talking about the process philosophy of Alfred N. Whitehead and its related idea called process theology. An explanation and critique of these ideas is far outside the scope of this book. I would recommend to those interested a book titled Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives, edited by Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2008), particularly chapter 10.

16 This does not mean that God changed in the Incarnation. Rather, the human being, the man Jesus Christ, changed. Jesus, the God-Man, was and is not simple. But all complexity is in Him due to and in virtue of His human nature. Those changes do not affect His divine nature. It remains exactly what it is no matter what. That is why the Church has always said that Jesus as two natures—one fully human (and so the man Jesus changes) and one fully divine (which never changes). It seems to me that to suggest that the human nature changes the divine nature would literally mean that Jesus’ human and divine natures were mixed up in such a way that He had neither a
Christ, God really is human and really does compassionately respond. This book isn’t the place to preach, so let me just say this about Jesus and leave it here: Jesus Christ the Man truly is God, and He truly does love and respond and care. He also judges and makes amends. He forgives and condemns. In Jesus Christ, God is truly and fully responsive, but responsive as Man through His human nature.

But what about God in Himself—that is, God in His divine nature—rather than God in man—that is, God in His human nature? Let’s start with God’s “emotions.” What does it mean for God to become angry or become happy? I would suggest to you that God doesn’t have a range of emotions and that He does not respond to us in them. Rather, God just is Himself, and in Himself, there is no better word for that than Happiness. But the question is how we are related to Him. If we do or are feeling this, then we may be related to God this way, and we may experience that Absolute Existence in a way that we call “blessing.” If we do something else, we may be so related to Him in a way we may call “cursing” or “anger.” In another, we may be related to Him such that we call it “comforting.” In all of these cases, God doesn’t change. We do, and so how we perceive Him changes.

Does that mean that God doesn’t love us or doesn’t care how we behave or what we feel? Of course not! Strictly speaking, to love someone is to will their good, and God is always willing our good. That is why we exist—because God is willing our good. But in willing our good, if we act in a way that deprives us of our good—if we do that for which we are not created or that which goes against our nature (in a word, if we sin)—then we are “outside of God’s will,” and so we experience His willing of our good differently. That willing becomes “corrective.” We are no longer being “blessed,” and we open ourselves up to pain, and in that pain we perceive God as being “angry.” So in that sense God cares a great deal about what we do and how we feel.

So fine, it is we that change, and that explains God’s “reactions” to us. But what about prayer? How can we say that God doesn’t change when He chooses to answer a prayer? If God responds to our prayers, isn’t He changing in response to us?

The best answer I am aware of is that God does not, in fact, change in response to our prayers. Rather, very simply, we change in how we relate to God. Think of it this way: there are some things God wants you to have. Some you get just because He says so (the sunrise this morning, for instance). Some you get because He enabled you to work for them (your paycheck, for instance). And some you get because you asked for them (answered prayers). Just like God doesn’t change in causing the sun to rise or you

fully human nature nor a fully divine nature, but instead a half-human/half-divine nature that was neither God nor man! Such a view, though, was rejected early by the Church, and we ought to follow their lead in rejecting it today.
getting your paycheck, God doesn’t change when He answers your prayers. Rather, God just said from His eternity, “I will for you to have X, and I have decided that the way you will get it is by asking for it.” And in asking for it, I change, and being in that particular relationship to God, my life changes. God decrees that the means of receiving this or that, in some cases, is by my asking (and perhaps by my asking repeatedly). So if I receive, it is because I ask. And if I do not receive, it is because I do not ask. But in none of this does God change. He just is what He is. The real questions are who am I, what am I doing, and how am I related to this unchanging God?

Before I leave this section I want to make one more point. People who insist God can change on these grounds usually will argue that God is love and that at some level God is perfectly good, and that can never change. First, I think it’s interesting that even these people find something about God that is absolutely unchanging. But second, suppose we grant that God’s goodness is unchangeable. My question is, why? If God is subject to change, if He can respond to us, if He can have emotional reactions, if He can change in all of those ways, why can He not change at the basic level of His character? Proponents of DS have a simple answer. God’s character does not change because God does not change at all. He just is what He is and cannot be anything else. But critics of DS can’t say that. It seems to me that their claim that God’s goodness is unchangeable is arbitrary. Sure, it is something that sounds nice. Who would not want to believe that God is always loving? It is beautiful to affirm that God is and will always be good. But what basis do they have for saying that is the case? That goes back to what I first said in this chapter. Just because we want something to be true, it doesn’t mean that it is. Some might say, “Well the Bible says God is always good!” And that’s true! And a perfectly good God would never lie. But what if God’s character could change after all? Suppose that in ten trillion years He becomes not so good. Then He could lie. He could fail to keep His promises. Then Scripture would no longer be true, because Scripture is only God’s word, and a person’s word is only as good as the person who spoke it. In other words, I am concerned that Christians who deny DS are actually undermining the very trustworthiness of the Bible they claim to believe.

The bottom line to all this is that God is not a cosmic being who is just stronger and smarter and better than we are. He is wholly different from us. And everything we have and even everything we are is completely dependent on how we relate to Him. And it is that relationship to Him that determines how we “see” Him—as angry or happy or compassionate or saying “yes” to this or “no” to that or not answering us at all. In all of this, we are because God is, and because God is love, we are because God loves. I don’t know about you, but I think that is the God of Scripture!
Chapter Eleven: Objections to Divine Simplicity
God’s Sovereignty and Human Free Will

The last several chapters, I think, offered some pretty serious objections against DS, but I’m pretty sure we were able to see that they are ultimately misplaced. They really just boiled down a question of whether or not God is in time, how He relates to us, and what that ultimately means about His nature.

These next couple of arguments, though, are far more difficult. I’m going to say right up front that if anything gives us warrant to reject God’s Simplicity, it is what you are going to read in the next two chapters. While I’m going to offer what I think are sufficient rebuttals, let me be honest up front and say that you may well find my counter-arguments insufficient.

The reason has to do with the nature of these problems. They are of the most theological sort. They deal with the loftiest types of questions and attempt to look at what may ultimately be pure mysteries. As such, we may not be able to answer them at all. Still, I think I’m bound by honesty to share these problems with you, offer you what I can in response, and let you think and pray about it for yourself.

I said that I find it the argument we just looked at in the last chapter about God’s emotional responses the most potent. Against that, I think the argument we are about to consider is the most difficult (in the sense of being the most mind-bending) because it deals with a question that people have been wrestling with for thousands of years: “If God is sovereign—if He controls everything—then do people really have free will?”

Now, it would be easy to write an entire book just on this subject (some have!). I obviously can’t do that here. But let me just illustrate how the problem is uniquely presented in the context of the debate over Divine Simplicity.

If God is simple, then He could not be anything other than what He is, since He is pure actuality and has no potentiality to be other than what He actually is. But if God cannot be other than what He is, then it seems that He could not do other than what He has done. When a human being (or animal or angel or whatever) makes a choice, we choose between this and that. We have the potential to choose this and the potential to choose that. But in God, there is no potentiality. He just is what He does. So it would seem that God could not choose anything other than what He actually chose. He doesn’t choose this or that. He just does this. And that would mean that there was no real choice involved at all. God would turn out to be more of a divine machine that just acts according to its predetermined nature. God would be, in a way, a slave to Himself, without free will.
But that argument would also extend to creation. Because God also knows everything, then He knows the way He created the world, including every single thing that every single person He created would ever do. But since God has to be the way He is, and since God is our Creator, it seems that God must create us the way that we are. In other words, if God is simple, then not only does He necessarily exist the way that He does, but because He is the first cause, then that would mean that we necessarily exist the way that we do, too. And that means that we do not have free will, either!

Critics of DS, then, sometimes argue from all this that if God could be different than He is, if He has free will, if the world can be different from the way it is, or if you or I have free will, then it seems that God is not simple. As a matter of fact, it seems that Simplicity fails on all four counts. God certainly could have acted differently than He did, He has free will, the world could have been different than it is, and we have free will. So God is not simple, right?

Well, not so fast. To answer this objection, let’s break it down into two separate problems. The first is the question of the freedom of God’s actions, and the second is the question of the freedom of our actions.

To answer the first problem, let’s start by distinguishing between two ways something has to be the way that it is. That is, there are two ways we can say that something is necessary. First, something might be necessary just by nature. All triangles have to have three sides because that is what it is to be a triangle. All unmarried men are bachelors because that is what it means to be a bachelor. Some things, though, are necessary not by nature but rather on because they really are what they are. I didn’t have to write this book. But I did. And since I did, it is necessarily true that I wrote it. If I am sitting down, it is necessarily true that I am sitting. And if I stand up, it’s necessarily true that I’m standing up.

You might consider these as before-the-fact and after-the-fact necessity. Before you see a particular triangle, you know it will have three sides because it is before-the-fact-necessary that triangles have three sides. But you don’t know until you see me whether I’m sitting or standing. Upon seeing me, you know after-the-fact that I necessarily am sitting. The important thing to see in this distinction is that before-the-fact necessity can never change, but things that are necessary after-the-fact can. If something is necessary after the fact, we can always say that it could have been different. So on this view, there are some things about God that are necessary before-the-fact and some that are necessary after-the-fact. The fact that God is love is necessary before-the-fact. The fact that God created the universe is necessary after-the-fact.

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17 In technical jargon, the terminology is absolute necessity and necessity by supposition, respectively.
Now that little example helps us out quite a bit with our problem. We can boil it down a little further. The fact that God wills *something* is necessary before-the-fact. That’s even true of you and me. We can’t not will something. The question for God, you, and me is *what* we will. That He wills may be necessary before-the-fact, but what He wills is necessary after-the-fact. Now, DS says that God is what He is necessarily. It does not, though, say that He is what He is with before-the-fact necessity. It just means that God chose *what* He is from Eternity, and having chosen that, it is necessary that He did so—that’s after-the-fact necessity. And if that is true, it goes a long way in explaining God’s omniscience. Do people exist? Yes. Why? Because God created them. Does God know that He created people? Yes. Why? Because God knows what He does (I know, pointing out that God is aware of His actions isn’t terribly profound). And so it is with pretty much every single fact in the whole of creation—the number of stars, where they are, how many trees are in the United States, at what time the sun will rise tomorrow, and maybe even how much wood a wood chuck could chuck.

In other words, God is absolutely free. And Divine Simplicity, more than any other view of God, explains that. Every other view has God in some sense dependent on something else for what He is or what He is doing. But in DS, God and God alone absolutely and freely chooses not only what He is doing but even more fundamentally what He is. And *that* is also what it means to be God. (If you weren’t too impressed by my observation about God knowing His own actions, I would invite you to meditate a bit on that last statement, because I think it actually is pretty profound.)

But that leads us to the second problem. I said just above that “pretty much every single fact in the whole world” was the kind that is directly related to what God decided. But not all of them. What about those facts related to what you and I decide? In other words, God may be free to choose what He does, but what about us? Are we free?

This is where the really hard problem is. Let me explain it. Imagine John decides freely to go out and cut his grass today. God certainly knows that to be true. It is necessarily true after-the-fact that John has made that decision. But it seems that John could have decided *not* to cut the grass. And if John had decided not to cut the grass, then God would have known that instead.

Do you see the problem? It looks like God’s knowledge of the world is dependent on what John decides. And that means that God is in some sense dependent on John, which means that God is affected or changed by John, which means that God is neither simple nor the first cause.

One obvious solution is just to deny that John freely chooses to cut the grass. We can just say that God decides that John will cut the grass, and so John decides it. But that doesn’t seem like an acceptable position, because it means that human beings do not
have free will after all. On that view, free will is just an illusion. And if you are fine with that solution, then just skip ahead to the next chapter, because the question is answered. But if we insist that John really does have a choice in the matter—that human beings have free will in at least some matters—then how do we avoid making God dependent on John?

Before I offer my argument, I want to present to you what is becoming an increasingly popular answer to the question, especially among evangelical Christian thinkers. This view (in its various forms) goes back in some ways to a theologian named Luis de Molina (1535-1600), so it is sometimes called "Molinism." In its original form, the idea was that God knows our nature so well that He can predict with absolute certainty what we will do in any given situation. This looked like a relatively straightforward solution to the problem. Because God knows everything, including what I will do in any given situation, He can determine the outcome of any course of events by doing this rather than that and knowing what we will do in response. In this way, God is viewed as the sort of perfect chess master, where He actually knows us so well that He uses our own choices to bring about His will. So He is absolutely sovereign and we really have free will! And there was the added bonus that not only did God know all things, but we also now have a way of showing how God always knows what would have been if things were different in any given situation.

It didn’t take people too long, though, to see two fatal flaws with this view. The first was that it fundamentally had God reacting to human choices. In a sense, this solution to the problem makes God’s actions contingent on what I will choose. Suppose God wants me to choose Y, and He knows that I will do so if He causes X. Therefore, God causes X. But look at what we’ve just done. God is essentially basing His actions on me. In a real sense, I am the one who caused God to act in a particular way (in this case, to cause X). Suddenly, God is no longer absolutely sovereign. He has become contingent on me.

As bad as that might be, though, there was a worse problem. In short, if God knows that I will always choose Y in this particular set of conditions, in means that I don’t really have a free will at all. We don’t say a ball chooses to fall when we drop it. Rather, we say it is obeying the laws of gravity. In just the same way, this idea actually makes our "choices" little more than obeying the laws of our own particular natures. If the conditions are X, Y, and Z we will always choose this. If the conditions are A, Y, and Z, we will always choose that. So there’s no free choice at all. Our wills are determined not by ourselves, but by the conditions we face. The bottom line is that while this view attempted to harmonize God’s sovereignty with man’s free will, it actually denied both. Man was little more than a machine, and God had become dependent on him.

The popular form of Molinism today doesn’t make that mistake. Rather than saying God knows our natures exhaustively so that He can perfectly “predict” what we will do, the
argument these days is that at the beginning of time, God saw before Him every possible world and chose which one to create. In other words, God saw that in one world that Adam ate the forbidden fruit, Peter denied Jesus, George Washington crossed the Delaware River, and you read this book. He saw another world in which Adam ate the forbidden fruit, Peter denied Jesus, George Washington crossed the Delaware River, but you did not read this book. He saw every combination of all those variables and an infinite number of other worlds with all their variables. And out of all those words, this is the one that He decided to create, complete with all of our choices.

Again, this looks like a great answer to the question of how God can be sovereign and how people can be free. After all, you really did choose to read this book, and people really did choose to make every choice they’ve ever made. And God really is sovereign because He chose to create this world. After all, He could have made any of the other ones if He’d wanted to. And we have, again, the added benefit of showing how not only does God know all things, but how He perfectly knows what would have been the case in any other situation, too.

Unfortunately, this view seems to have a fatal flaw as well. I fully admit that it allows mankind free will. I’m not convinced that it allows God His sovereignty. The reason is that God is still basing His decision on you and me, on our choices. He is, again, dependent on us. After all, on this view, if God wants X to happen, He has to look at all the worlds in which people choose X. That means His choice is limited by our choices. It also means that what God knows is dependent on me. In a sense, God has to “look and see what I would choose” so that He can “decide” whether or not to act a certain way. Can you see how that makes God’s knowledge dependent on me? All of this also seems to entail potentiality in God, since God first sees all possible worlds and then chooses which world to create based on what He “learned” from His “examination” of those worlds. That would mean that God isn’t the first cause!

And that’s why I wanted to share this idea with you. The real problem with the old sovereignty versus free will debate is actually not so much trying to get the two ideas to work together. The real problem is how to get them to work together while safeguarding God as first cause. If any solution has God effected or changed by us—if any solution has God dependent on us—then we have to reject it. Because whatever it makes God, such a “solution” would mean God is not the first cause, and that which is not the first cause is not God!

So what is my solution? I’m glad you asked!

I’d start by making this observation: God, as first cause, does not only cause things to happen. He also causes things to happen in accordance with their natures. A window shattering when a ball goes through it is different from a seed sprouting. Both are real
changes, but one change is “from the outside” while the other change is “from within.”
God is the cause of both, not just of the events, but of the way the events happen, too.
Or, again, God may cause one sick person to get better through the work of medicine
and another miraculously and immediately. In both cases, God is the cause of the
persons’ health, but He is also the cause of the way in which that health was gained.

Now, if that’s true, then it shouldn’t be too hard to say that God causes things that are
necessarily determined to happen in their necessarily determined way, and He causes
things that are not necessarily determined to happen (that is, things that are
indeterminate) in their not necessarily determined (that is, their indeterminate) way. Let
me give you a couple of examples of what I mean here.

Suppose I hold a penny up with nothing suspending it whatsoever. All things being
equal, what will happen if I let it go? It will fall, of course. And why? Because gravity
works! It is the nature of matter that the penny is attracted to the earth, and we
understand that nature so well that we can describe it mathematically in great detail. We
can predict exactly how long it will take the penny to get from my hand to the floor, and
we can predict with near perfect accuracy how much energy it will hit the ground with. In
other words, the falling of the penny is determined by its nature—and not just the fall,
but the way it falls.

On the other hand, suppose before I let it go, I flip it. Now, it is still a fact that the penny
will fall. That is determined to happen by its nature. But will it land heads or tails up?
What determines that? Lots of things! So many things, in fact, that you never know
which one it will land on. You can say that if you flip it one hundred times, then about
fifty of those it will land heads up and fifty times it will land tails up. But you can never
know in any given flip which will be heads and which will be tails. It is determined by
nature it must be one of those. But which it will be is indeterminate.

I hope that doesn’t strike you as abstract or unimportant. In fact, it is highly important.
Go ask any insurance actuary. The whole world of insurance, of risk management, is
built on this idea. Did you go to school? If so, you almost certainly were living by this
principle. You probably didn’t know which job you would get—that was indeterminate—but
you knew that you needed a degree or diploma to get that particular job—that was
determined. Sports coaches rely on understanding probabilities to guide their teams to
victory. The ones that get it right more than they get it wrong are the ones that keep
their jobs. Watch the Weather Channel lately? Again, you are working with
indeterminate probabilities. It’s all around you. Scientists are seeing the importance of
this at the most fundamental levels of reality. In a very weird field called quantum
mechanics, they are finding that more often than not they can only tell you what will
happen within a small window of likelihood. The bottom line here is that our whole world
looks like it is filled with far more indeterminate events than determined ones.
But what does this have to do with God and free will? Well look at it this way: if God can cause determined events to happen in a determinate fashion, and if He can cause indeterminate events to happen in an indeterminate fashion, then He can cause some things to happen because He just wills them to happen (e.g., He creates humans), and He causes other things to happen as humans will them to happen (e.g., human free will). It helps a bit here to understand that to will something is to choose between this or that. That is what it means to will something. And a free will is one that is not determined to this or that. You might choose this. You might choose that. But which will it be? That’s the indeterminate part. Now once you choose it, it has been determined (so there is your after-the-fact necessity we talked about earlier). But prior to your choice, it is not determined. So we can say that for God to cause your choice means that He brings about your indeterminate choice in its indeterminate fashion.

At the most fundamental level, then, the debate over sovereignty and free will rests on a basic misunderstanding. The assumption seems to be that if God causes something, then He determines it. But that isn’t what “cause” means. Rather, if God causes something, it just means that He brings it into existence, where the “it” is not just the thing but also its nature. So for Him to bring an indeterminate thing into existence (e.g., your choice) means that He brings about an indeterminate thing! As such, God is not responding to us at all. He is, rather, bringing about causes and effects as He so wills, which is exactly what a sovereign God, and a first cause, does.
Chapter Twelve: Objections to Divine Simplicity
The Trinity

The last major objection I want to deal with in this chapter might be the most obvious. It might be the one you have been thinking of since you read the first chapter. “Wait,” you might have been thinking. “If God is not composed of parts—if He is pure, undivided Being—then how can we say that God is *three distinct Persons*?” In other words, if DS is true, then how can God be a Trinity? Doesn’t the Trinity suggest that God is at least composed of three distinct parts—the Father, Son, and Spirit?

I want to start by yet again accepting how difficult this question is. But here, even more than above, I would also point out that we are talking about an incredible mystery. It seems to me that the Trinity itself is a difficult doctrine to understand—not impossible, mind you, but difficult. And in light of that, I think it helps a lot just to give a proper definition of the Trinity. I meet a lot of people, both Christians and non-Christians, who think it is something like, “One God in three,” or “One person who is really three persons” or “One being that is three beings.” But such answers are wrong. The first is vague at best and the others of simply self-contradictory. What the Trinity actually says is that in the Unity of God there are Three Persons, each distinct from one another but all identical with the Divine Essence.

Put in a little less technical speak, the doctrine of the Trinity is really nothing more than a summary statement of seven otherwise relatively clear assertions that we get from the Bible:

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Holy Spirit is God.
4. The Father is not the Son.
5. The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
6. The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
7. There is exactly one God.

Whatever else the Trinity means and how you explain it, Divine Simplicity is nothing more or less than the affirmation of the seventh statement here and the last clause of the more technical definition above. I have become convinced that most critics of DS actually don’t believe in the Trinity at all. In rejecting the claim that God is simple on the basis that it contradicts the Trinity, they are really suggesting that the three Persons in the Godhead are really distinct from each other in such a way that they are three *beings*. But three beings, by definition, cannot be one being. It isn’t a mystery or a paradox to say “three beings are really one being.” That’s a self-contradiction!
What we need, then, is a proper explanation of this difficult doctrine. We don’t need analogies that only create difficulties later. Some, for instance, compare the Trinity to water, which in one mode is solid and in another liquid and in another gas. But that suggests an old heresy called Modalism, the idea that God is really just one being who appears in three different forms. Others prefer a geometric comparison, as if the Trinity is like a triangle, where the Father, Son, and Spirit are comparable to each side of the figure. But what is that but Tritheism and its cousin the Social Trinity, the belief in three different gods that “make up” one God in some mysterious sense? I mean, a line is not a triangle. It’s just a line. So here we would have three different beings, none of which are really God after all. The old Trinity as 1×1×1=1 analogy (as opposed to 1+1+1=3) seems just as flawed. Taken seriously, it doesn’t say one person times one person times one person equals one God. Why does the “1” on the left side of the equation mean “person” but the “1” on the right side means “God”? I don’t see a reason, so it seems to me that this analogy actually suggests the self-contradictory notion that three Divine Persons are actually one Divine Person.

So much for analogies. Better to do the hard work of learning what this Trinity business is all about. The good news is that when we do, how it is reconciled with DS becomes not only obvious, but part and parcel of the very definition of the idea of one God.

To get started, I have to introduce a somewhat technical term to you (sorry, just stick with me. I’ll try to make this as painless as possible): procession. In its general sense it means an act of movement along some orderly line, from something to something else. We use the word in a lot of ways. I “proceed” to do this. We can “proceed” from cause to effect. The act of thinking is a “procession” of one thought to another. You get the idea.

Now, in classical thinking, if we start with God as Existence In Itself, since that Existence is a Person, we can from there identify two processions in God. That is because all Persons have two things in common: thought and a will. Yet as I suggested just above, a thought is a procession. And in the same manner, so is the willing of something. Now, it is certainly the case that processions of thought and will have external objects: I am thinking about something else, or I am willing that to happen. I am neither the something else nor am I what I’ve willed. Call those external processions, because they start inside of me and move outside of me. But if you think about it, I think you’ll see that for every external procession, there has to be a corresponding internal

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18 Remember that God contains all perfections, and that each are identical with His essence; to be a person is a perfection; therefore, God is not just merely a Person, but to be a person is the very essence of God. In other words, since one way something can exist is to be a person, then Existence In Itself, unlimited and infinite, has “within” itself the very notion of what it is to be a person. The real difference here is that the Person itself is unlimited and infinite in God. God is literally the infinite Person. All that is to say, if God were not a Person, He would not be God at all!
procession. I mean that when I think about something, there is something that happens in my mind that stays in my mind. When I will something—when I decide to do something—there is, again, something that starts in me that stays in me. We sometimes talk about this by saying, “I’ve made up my mind [to do this or that].” That procession starts in me and stays in me, so call it an *internal procession*.

Let’s press the idea of an internal procession a little further. It seems that in such a case, we’re not talking about anything other than you (or me, or whoever is having the internal procession). When I decided to write this book, the external procession had an external object: the book. I, after all, am not the book. But what about the internal procession in me? I thought about the book. But before it was written (and for that matter, thinking about it after it is done), the idea can be completely found in my own mind. And in willing to write the book, I set *myself* to doing the act of writing. The setting of myself is just me being a certain way. So internal processions are just my own self existing in a particular way.

Can you see how this is moving towards the Trinity? I hope so, but I want to first caution against what might seem like an obvious but mistaken move. We might be tempted to say that the first procession is the intellect, or the Word of God, and the second procession is the will of God such that the Father would be the principle cause of the processions, the Son would be the first procession, and the Holy Spirit the second procession. The problem is that would mean that none of the Persons would really be complete (that is, perfect). I mean, what would the Father be if He did not have a will or an intellect? Or what would the Son be without a will or even His own existence?

What we have to do at this point is to go back to the idea of relations. We talked about that a bit in chapter nine. Let’s start with the observation that the processions are really related to each other and to the source, not in a way that the processions are distinct from each other—after all, they are internal processions and as such are all just the same essence, the same being—but rather that the relations are distinct from one another.

Let me explain. We have one relation that in biblical language we term paternity, or the Father, which is the source of the others. But where there is a Father, there must be an offspring. That relation is called filiation, which refers to a Son. Where there is a son, there must be a Father. Further, we have a relation termed spiration, which in Western Christianity proceeds from both the Father and the Son but in Eastern Christianity proceeds, like the Son, directly from the Father. That relation is called the Holy Spirit.

Now follow me carefully here, because this is the payoff. The processions are not the Divine Persons, strictly speaking. The relations are. Again, the internal processions are real, but “they” are just the same thing, the same being, the same essence. There is no
real distinction in them. But they are really related to each other, and those distinctions are real. So those relations are not surprisingly closely associated with the processions. I mean, that’s where they come from. Look again at the names I gave you in the above paragraph. The procession of the intellect or the Word means that the Word is proceeding from something. That means that what it comes from is the Source. And the source produces something else. The biblical language for that production is “generation.” So the Source “generates” the Word—that is, the Source “begets” the Word. Fathers “beget” children, so the first relation is a relation of paternity to filiation, or Father to Son.

The second procession is of the will. What is willed is, again, what is loved. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. We don’t have a proper name for a procession of love, but the biblical language here seems intuitively helpful: spiration, so that this relation is the Holy Spirit. Now, you should be able to see that these relations really are distinct. Paternity is not filiation. Spiration is not paternity, and so on. But the three relations are also not three distinct beings. After all, they are rooted in two internal processions. They are all really one and the same thing. They are all exactly the essence—Being Itself, completely undivided. One of the points here, then, is that the Father is not one Person with an intellect and will, and the Son another Person with another intellect and will, and the Spirit a third Person with a third intellect and will, where all three intellect/will combinations are in perfect harmony. Nope! Remember that the intellect and will are internal processions, identical with the very essence of God Himself. That means that all three Persons just are the same intellect and the same will. They are all the same act. There is absolutely no distinction between them except in their relations to each other. The three Persons are all exactly the same Undivided, Absolutely Simple Being-in-Itself. To say any different is not merely to challenge Divine Simplicity, but it is to reject the Trinity.

I realize the arguments over the past two chapters have probably been very hard to follow at times. They may not be entirely satisfying. I can’t draw pictures here the way I could in other chapters to help you “get” it. That’s because the moment you try to visualize Undivided Being, you automatically create problems. Analogies, by nature, can never be perfect.

You may have read (and maybe reread) the material in these chapters and wished you felt like you got it more. I don’t know that I can give you that. There are times when I feel like I get it. There are times when I don’t. So my goal isn’t to produce a feeling in you. It’s to help you see something, namely, that fact that DS is completely compatible with two great mysteries of the Christian faith: that God is sovereign even as man is free, and that in the Unity of the Godhead are three distinct Persons.
Yet I may have failed even that. You still may not see how DS is compatible with those truths. And if that is you, I want to close this chapter, and this part of the book, with a simple argument and final appeal: does any idea really answer these questions? Aren’t we straining, at least in some way, to speak what cannot ultimately be spoken? If I’ve failed in showing the consistency of DS with the truths of God’s sovereignty, man’s free will, and the Trinity, it could certainly be that I am just not up to so great a task. But could it not also be that these problems can only finally be answered with suggestions, ideas that get us moving in the right direction? I had a pastor say to me once regarding the sovereignty versus free will debate that, in his mind, the only important point was that we affirmed both because the Bible does, and that so long as we do that, he was happy.

Perhaps your answers to these mysteries are better than mine. Perhaps your answers are not consistent with DS. But as far as I can tell, the answers I’ve provided above, which are (as far as I can tell) the answers the Church has historically provided, are not only consistent with God’s Divine Simplicity, but are in fact driven by it. They’re answers that are, for me, if not completely satisfying, at least suggestive of the right direction. Maybe now you can say the same.
Part Three

Divine Simplicity: Its Benefits — Answering “So What?”

In this final part, chapters thirteen and fourteen look at some of the benefits of DS. After all, as interesting (to some of you) as philosophical and theological speculation might be, the real question is, “So what? What has this got to do with anything?”

I hope to show in these chapters that the answer is, “A lot.” Whether you are looking to be better able to answer difficult questions about your faith or even just looking to better live out your faith, to better love and appreciate God, these chapters intend to offer you some food for thought.

Truth is worth knowing for its own sake. Truth about God even more so. But if truth, and if truth about God in particular, can lead us to be better, wiser, more loving, gracious, patient, and compassionate people, then we should let it do so. May your knowledge of the nature of God lead you further down the road of faith, and in that, may your faith bear much fruit.
Chapter Thirteen: Some Apologetic Benefits of Divine Simplicity

At this point, I want to shift gears. I’ve been arguing for a long time now about what DS is, why we should believe it, and why objections against it don’t really stand up to scrutiny. But when all is said and done, I think it’s important to get back to an issue I raised early on in our journey, which was the question, “So what?” Why does any of this matter? It certainly isn’t an issue of salvation. I mean, Jesus did not say, “Whoever believes in Me and believes that God is simple has everlasting life” (cf. John 6:47). So isn’t this all just making much ado about nothing?

In one sense, it might be. I mean, even if you accept that God is simple, it probably isn’t going to dramatically change the way you live. But in another sense, it’s anything but nothing, and that for two reasons.

First, God apparently cares that we be careful in what we say about Him. God says in Job 42:7, “My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has” (NKJV). I, for one, would rather God not be angry at me for saying what is not right about Him. And really, what is more important than God? Just because this material is abstract, it doesn’t mean that it isn’t important. If God is the most important thing there is, then it seems to me that what we think about God is more important than anything else!

The second reason, though, is that DS turns out to have some pretty big benefits. They fall into two categories: apologetic and devotional. By apologetic benefits, I mean those ideas that help us work through other theological problems or answer difficult questions about our faith. It might seem odd that DS could actually answer questions since we’ve spent most of this book answering questions that DS raises. But I hope you’ll see very shortly that, in fact, DS does offer a great many answers that otherwise we just would not have. The other group of benefits is devotional, by which I mean the ways in which holding to DS can help makes us better Christians and, believe it or not, better people. We’ll talk about the theological benefits in this chapter and the devotional benefits next.

Does the idea of “God” even make sense?

One of the main arguments used by atheists these days is that the whole idea of God just doesn’t make any sense. To get what they are saying, get a piece of paper out and try to draw a picture of a square triangle. After that, draw a picture of a running person who is sitting down. Then get some crayons out and draw a green heavy. Finally, try draw a picture of three people—we’ll call them John, Frank, and Mary. Draw John to be taller than Frank. Got that? Now draw Frank to be taller than Mary. Got that? Now draw Mary to be taller than John? Got it, right?
The point, if it isn’t obvious, in all of these examples is that they just don’t make sense. The ideas are self-contradictory. They really aren’t things at all. They’re just nonsense. And in a similar way, atheists will argue that God is just nonsense. Popular (and downright silly) versions of this argument include questions like, “If God can do anything, can He make a rock so big He can’t lift it?” Or, “if God made everything, then who made God?”

You don’t need DS to answer these simple questions. But understanding DS helps you have a deeper grasp on why such questions are, if I may be blunt, stupid. The first question wants to know what “omnipotent” really means. And DS helps us see what the idea is really trying to get at is: absolutely everything that is or will be, is or will be because God causes it. There is nothing that was or is or will be that isn’t caused by Him. Further, there is nothing that could be that wouldn’t be apart from Him causing it. And that, in turn—going back to DS specifically—is because everything that ever was, is, will be, or could be, has this one thing in common: existence. They either did exist, do exist, will exist, or could exist. And if God is Existence In Itself, then anything, absolutely all of that, comes from Him. That, my dear reader, is real omnipotence.

The second question really wants to know if anything exists necessarily, in and of itself, without being created. Theists can claim that God “just exists,” that He is necessary and uncreated, but on what basis? DS provides one of the best solutions to such a question, if not the only one. In short, if God just is Existence (which is what we mean when we say, “God just is”), then it’s clear enough why He wasn’t created. After all, to be created is to come into existence. But how does existence come into existence? That’s just self-contradictory dribble, because if existence comes into itself, then it already exists. If that isn’t clear, think about it a little more deeply: to come into existence means that something did not exist and then it gained the property of existence. That means that there is an idea (existence) that we apply to this idea, and having applied it, we say it really exists. But if existence itself came into existence, that would have to mean that there was no such thing as existence, and that we applied to this idea of existence this property of existence to give it reality. But how can you apply a property (existence) that doesn’t exist? Obviously you can’t. So DS doesn’t just let us say with the Bible that God is I Am, but it explains to us why and how God just is I Am.

I want to push that point a little further though, because it gets at the heart of a popular argument some atheists are making these days (and to the heart of an argument they are not making that they ought to be). Richard Dawkins is a rather (in)famous atheist. He wrote a book called The God Delusion in which he sets out to prove that God is nothing more than a dangerous fantasy. His main argument is actually a twist on an argument a lot of theists like to use to prove that God does exist. The pro-God argument goes something like this: it is so unlikely as to be impossible for a tornado to blow through a junkyard and accidentally create a fully functional Boeing 747. In fact, if
someone were to suggest that the 747 got there in such a way, we would probably just laugh at them. Clearly, the plane was built by an intelligent designer. But the universe is far more complex and filled with infinitely more information than a Boeing 747. So by the same logic, it would be even more absurd to claim that the universe got here by time, chance, and random processes. Instead, it should be obvious that something as complex as the universe also needs a Designer, and such a Designer can only be called God.

Now, what Dawkins does is accept for the sake of argument the basic premise that really complicated things have to be designed—that is, that really complicated things don’t just pop into existence. They have to have someone to design and build them. He also accepts that the universe—for that matter, even just humans—are far more complicated than Boeing 747s. And that, he says, is why we can imagine human beings designing airplanes. That which designs something else must be at least as complex, if not more so, than the thing it is designing. Humans are very complex organisms, so we can build relatively complex things like airplanes.

Do you see where this is going? Dawkins now applies the same reasoning to God. If humans—indeed, the whole universe—are incredibly complex, then how much more complex must God be to have designed them? But since complex things don’t just pop into existence, since they need a designer, then it would seem that God needs to be designed, too, by a still more complex God. And that God? He, too, would need to be designed by a more complex God, and so on, forever and ever. But of course it’s silly to say that there is an infinite number of Gods creating other Gods, so the whole idea of God is silly.

Now, personally, as far as arguments go, I don’t think this is a very good one at all (and from what I can gather, neither do most philosophers, atheist or otherwise). The reason is that Dawkins is attacking an idea that theists don’t hold (that’s the straw man idea we talked about back in chapter seven). One difference between Dawkins’ target and the God of theism comes from the fact that he doesn’t specify what he means by “complex.” On the one hand, Dawkins could be thinking of complexity in God in the same way he thinks of complexity in nature—which is physical or biological complexity. Now, I would be the first to admit that his argument against a physically complex God is decisive (so perhaps we can use Dawkins’ in service of an argument against Mormonism). But God, as theists generally hold as certainly as we have been talking about in this book, is obviously not physical, much less physically complex.

Maybe we can be charitable and try to find a better way to think of “complexity” to make his argument stronger. Perhaps we could take it in a non-physical sense (i.e., the complexity of an idea). But unfortunately for our champion of atheism, this doesn’t get him any further. Remember that he is arguing based on the idea that it is very
improbable for very complex things (like Boeing 747s and human beings) to just exist without something more complicated creating them. But if that's true, it only applies to physical things. Ideas might be complex, but theists can argue that God Himself is just a pure spirit and not complicated as far as that goes. He might be a very smart spirit with very complicated ideas, and I can't see anything especially wrong with a suggestion like that.

Now at this point, we don't need DS to defend our faith from Dawkins' (weak) argument. But it is at just this point that a savvy, sophisticated atheist could make a very serious argument against belief in God if we don't accept DS.

The atheist could say, “Of course, you are right. Dawkins’ argument is foolish as far as it goes. But it does seem to rest on an important idea that you theists aren’t taking seriously. It seems that our complex universe either just exists on its own without explanation or else it was created by a very complex God who just exists on His own. Even if we grant that God’s complexity is just the complexity of ideas and wisdom and power, He is still highly complex—far more than you and I are. But if you are allowed to just claim that God, for some mysterious and unknowable reason, can exist without need for explanation even though He is complex, then why can’t I say the same thing about the universe? I mean, why can’t I just claim that our complex universe, for some mysterious and unknowable reason, just exists anyway without need for explanation? Maybe if your complex God has some property that you can’t identify that lets Him just exist even though He is complex, then matter might have some similar property even if I can’t identify it that just lets it exist even though it is complex! And since we know for sure that matter exists, then why should we bother suggesting a God to create it?”

The Christian might be tempted to respond to this atheist by pointing out that matter is physical and God is not. After all, that worked against Dawkins. But that play doesn’t work here. Because what’s the difference between physical complexity and spiritual complexity? Why must material complexity have an explanation but not immaterial complexity? It seems that our atheist has a very good argument. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander; so if complexity of any kind can just exist without explanation, then we ought to say that complexity of all kinds can exist without explanation, and that includes the complexity of our universe. So, we no longer have a need for God.

I can only see one way out of the argument: divine simplicity. We should admit that if immaterial complexity doesn’t require explanation then neither does the material complexity of our physical universe. But we can say that complexity—all complexity, even immaterial complexity—obviously does require explanation (go back to chapter two to review why—if something is complex it has parts, and something with parts is dependent on something else to explain how it came to be and to explain why it is the
way it is). Therefore, if a complex physical universe exists, there must exist a non-
complex (that is, simple), immaterial (that is, spiritual) cause. And advocates of DS have
a ready answer as to what that cause is.

I'll leave it to those who still want to insist that God is not simple, that is, that He is
complex, to figure out how to answer our atheist. But for those of us who hold to what
classical theists have always held, we can yawn and move on to a still more serious
(and I think more interesting) issue.

What makes something good?

Socrates is said to have asked a young man named Euthyphro, “Is the pious or holy
beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods?” To
restate the question in a way that makes sense to us today, we might ask, “Is something
good because God commands it, or does God command something because it is
good?” This is a very old problem that confronts any person who claims to believe in a
moral God who issues moral commands. It’s a difficult question because either way you
answer it you end up with major problems.

Let me demonstrate. Suppose we say that something is
right or wrong because God commands or forbids it. In that
case, the reason murder is wrong is because God said so.
Likewise, the reason humility is good is again because God
said so. That might sound fine, and a lot of people would
be happy to say just that. But count me among those who
think it doesn’t work. The reason is simple. On this view,
God’s declaration of what is right and wrong is completely
arbitrary. Sure, God says murder is wrong. But He could
have said it was praiseworthy, and then it would be good
to kill each other. Or God could change His mind
tomorrow (whatever we mean by that) and override the
old “moral law” against murder and tell us it is now not just permissible but good to
murder.

The same goes with any (im)moral idea you come up with. If it’s not based in anything
other than God’s arbitrary declaration, then there’s really no such thing as a moral law
at all. An obvious response to this is that God would never change His mind. But why
not? Because the Bible says He doesn’t? Because God tells the truth? But if telling the
truth is good and lying is bad, on this view, it is only because God has declared it to be
so. That means that God could change His mind today and make lying good and make
honesty evil. You say it would be wrong for God to declare honesty to be evil? But why?
On this view, God declares whatever He wants to be good or evil!
The real point here isn’t so much, though, what God might do. I’m hoping that as you read the above, far from feeling like you needed to give a real response, you actually felt like saying something like, “Oh come on, that’s just stupid!” And if so, you were actually on the right track. But I think that gets to the real problem with this idea that things are right and wrong just because God says so. Can you even imagine a world in which lying was good and honesty is evil? Suppose God declared that to be true. Wouldn’t that make it impossible for God to communicate with us? I mean, if lying were good, and God said, “Thou shalt lie,” would God be telling the truth there?

I would submit that such a world is impossible because the idea is self-refuting. The same is true for murder. I don’t think it even makes sense for God to just declare that murder is good. The reason is that murder is the intentional, unjustified killing of a person with malice aforethought. If I unintentionally kill someone in self-defense, I can claim the killing was justified, and as such the act was not murder on at least two counts. If I kill someone in war, I can claim the killing is justified. If I kill someone on accident, then I may have committed manslaughter, but not murder. But for God to say that murder is good, He would have to say an unjustified action is good. Can you see the self-contradiction there? One of the things that makes something good is if we have a good reason in doing it. For instance, is it good to give a homeless man a hundred dollars? It depends, doesn’t it, on why I did it. If I did so out of love and a desire to help, then it was good. But suppose I did so to avoid paying a debt to a friend because I’m angry with her. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I tell her. “I would pay you back, but I gave all my money to the homeless today!” That would be wrong (even though the homeless man benefits from my action). To go back to our question on murder, if something is unjustified, then it has no good reason. So for God to declare murder good would be to say that something is good that has no reason for its goodness.

The point is that right and wrong do not, after all, seem like arbitrary matters, as if they could have been otherwise. As pious as it might sound, it just doesn’t seem right to say that something is wrong just because God says so.

So what about the other option? It seems clear enough that we should just say that God tells us what is good and what is bad. God commands honesty and forbids murder precisely because honesty is really good and murder is really bad. This view at least seems to uphold the idea that morality isn’t arbitrary. But there are two problems here, one that should be obvious and another deeper one.

The obvious problem is that this view makes God subject to certain moral truths. But God, if He really is God, isn’t subject to anything. That would deny both His sovereignty
and His self-existence. Still further, He would be contingent upon those moral truths, which would mean He cannot be the first cause, either, since something would be causing Him to act and decree in accordance with those laws. (As an aside, this is worth remembering the next time someone wants to accuse God of doing something evil. Such an assertion betrays this view of God’s relationship with morality, where God is somehow bound by and subject to moral laws.)

The second problem may not be so obvious, but I think it’s more serious. The big benefit of this view was that it is supposed to at least preserve the idea that morals are not arbitrary, that some things really are right and wrong. But if morality isn’t rooted in God’s commands, then what is it rooted in? Personal preference? Social preference? Those things can, and do, change all the time. The idea that we ought not harm each other? But why is that the moral principle? Because it is good for humanity? But why should humanity be so privileged? Because we are more advanced? What happens if we discover a more advanced species, or what if one group of humans becomes more advanced than another, perhaps through technology? Does that mean that the higher can harm the lower? Of course not. But again, why not? It doesn’t seem to matter if you or I say so. We’ve already said on this view it doesn’t matter if God says so. It doesn’t matter if society says so.

The bottom line is that this view in a twisted irony seems to leave us with moral relativism. Nothing at all is really right or really wrong. The only moral law that matters is the golden rule—he who has the gold makes the rule (or put differently, might makes right). And if that is true, we end up right back at the first view anyway, because God has all the might and all the gold, so what He says goes.

If none of that is satisfying to you, then you’re in good company. For centuries theists have said that there is a third option. We do not have to say that something is good because God says so, nor do we have to say that something is good and therefore God says so. Rather, we can say that God just is Good. Don’t read that as if I’m describing God as being good, as if I’m comparing Him to some standard of goodness and saying, “He measures up.” I mean that in the same sense I might say, “Triangles are three sided figures,” “Bachelors are unmarried men.” When I say, “God is Good,” I am saying that the very nature of God is Good. In somewhat convoluted English—or at least in Jeopardy speak—I might say, “Good is what God is.” This means that God doesn’t issue decrees about good and evil by looking at some standard outside Himself, nor does it mean that God makes things good or evil by so decreeing it. Rather, God has (or more technically, is) a particular nature, and like everything else, He acts in accordance with it. Therefore, God decrees in accordance with His nature, with what He is. When we say murder and lying are evil, we are saying that they are contrary to the nature of God. When we say that generosity and honesty are good, we are saying that they are consistent with God’s nature. God, then, just decrees Himself in creation.
That answer is fine as far as it goes, but it does have a minor problem. If we reject DS, then we have to say that God is not identical with His nature, but rather, He has a nature, just like you and I do. Just like you are limited by and act in accordance with your nature, the same would be true of Him. But now we’re right back at the problem we had just above. God is subject to something above Him—this “divine nature” that is not God. That nature controls and directs Him. Even if that nature is good, it still follows that God is subject to it. Therefore, He is not the first cause, not sovereign, and does not exist in and of Himself. What, we would have to ask, is causing God to be subject to that nature? We would literally be forced to ask the question, “What caused God?” Since something can’t come from nothing, and since something can’t be dependent on nothing, the only answer would have to be something above both God and His nature (just as there is something above you and your nature, something that “brings you together”). I assume you can see the absurdity in that.

But DS gives us a ready answer. God’s nature is not above Him. God is not subject to it. God is not caused to be linked to it. God just is His nature. Good, then, is not a part of God. It just is God. Morality is objective because God is, and God is good. That is, morality is objective because Good has objective existence in and of itself.

As it happens, you can get very deep into the philosophy of good. Since God is existence, and God is good, it becomes apparent that good is existence. And that statement forms the basis of much classical thinking on the moral law and even the natures of evil and sin. But such questions are too far afield for us to consider here. Suffice it to say that if you decide to pursue such questions, DS will provide you a strong starting point for answering them.

The bottom line is that DS provides a compelling answer to two of the most vexing problems theists have to face: the very coherence of the notion of “God” and how God and goodness are related. And in both cases, the answers are so profound that they actually become arguments not merely for the claim that God is simple but for His very existence. For it appears that everything in existence, both individually and collectively, owe their design and existence to a simple, immaterial, eternal cause. And unless we are to descend into the pits of moral relativism, it seems that we must accept the existence of a Moral Lawgiver that is not merely eternal, sovereign, and omnipotent (for stopping there leaves us with little more than a theistic version of “might makes right”) but also is identical with good Itself. Such existence can only be the God of classical theism, the divinely simple God.
Chapter Fourteen: Some Devotional Benefits of Divine Simplicity

Our look at God’s essential nature as undivided Existence In Itself, His radical simplicity, has probably been at times profound, at times confusing, at times revealing, and maybe even at times a bit boring. But before we close our discussion, I want to return to the question of “So what?” Why does any of this matter? We’ve seen a few reasons it matters so far. Divine Simplicity alone truly upholds the doctrine of the Trinity. Anything less is Modalism at best and Tritheism at worst. We saw that it helps make sense of the idea of God as the Moral Lawgiver. And those are very important points. But to be honest, even those are just a bit academic, aren’t they? As interesting as they might be, they probably don’t help you live out your faith any more fully. And with all due respect to such theology, it probably doesn’t help you love God or love your neighbor any better. For the philosophically minded and speculative theologians out there, the very fact that to contemplate God’s Divine Simplicity is to contemplate God Himself is reward enough. And I affirm that! I am one of those odd ducks who just gets excited by that sort of thing. Frankly, I hope you are, too, or at least if you aren’t that this discussion has given you an interest in it.

But for the more practically minded, for those who want to see how this doctrine teaches us to love God and love each other more, for those who want to know how knowing this can make us “better Christians,” I’d like to offer a few thoughts. Specifically, I want to look at five areas that are directly affected by DS and how understanding them can lead to a deeper understanding of, and faith in, God our Savior.

God’s Sovereignty

I’ve touched on God’s sovereignty several times throughout this book. It’s a major theme in the Bible. It holds (or at least ought to hold) a central place in the life and theology of any theist. But what is it? And what does it mean?

I would submit to you that, contrary to popular belief, “sovereignty” doesn’t merely mean “in control of everything.” To say that God is sovereign in that sense seems to make Him little more than a puppet master, and suddenly sovereignty doesn’t look much different than fate. Maybe the idea of fate has some benefits. I mean, why worry if what will happen is fated to happen? And human beings do crave security. What could be more secure than knowing everything is preplanned and happening according to plan?

But I think the problems of seeing sovereignty as determining our fates are a lot bigger than the benefits. For one thing, how do we explain the various evils in the world? If a child dies in a fire, was God in control of that? We may stiffen our lip and say yes and add that we aren’t allowed to question God. But is that really what God is like? Perhaps, but I don’t think so. The Bible has people questioning God all the time, including Jesus Himself on the cross, and it presents God nearly begging people to change their ways.
so that He doesn't have to discipline them. As a parent, I can relate to that. But if God isn't merely “in control of everything,” then what does sovereignty actually mean?

Here, I think DS gives us the answer. To be sovereign is to be completely unaffected by and independent of any and every outside influence. We don't change God. He changes us. Further, to be sovereign is to be the cause of all things in accordance with their nature. Sure, God could choose not to allow a person to sin in this particular way. And who knows how many times He has done just that? Certainly not us, because if He prevents me from doing this or that sin, I'll never know about it, now would I? But God can also choose to allow us to act in ways that He hates. He can allow things to happen that He despises. Why? Because He is sovereign. Because He alone gets the final choice of what to allow and what not to allow. Because the Bible tells us that He has a final plan that He's working and leading us to.

And that’s where I think God’s sovereignty is truly amazing. In order for God’s plan to come about, He doesn’t need to manipulate me or you. He’s even better than the perfect chess master. Whatever move you make, He’s just going to use it to cause to happen exactly what He wants anyway. And in light of that, I think that God’s sovereignty actually elevates human free will, because now, our free will isn’t something that God has to control or let affect Him. Rather, we have the freedom to respond as we choose to what God is doing. He’s going to do whatever He wants regardless. That is true sovereignty. But He allows us, by His grace and love, to respond to Him, to be co-creators with Him, as Paul puts it, to be fellow-workers in the field of His harvest (see 1 Cor. 3:9).

And all of this is thanks to God’s Simplicity. For if God is really related to us, affected by us, reactive to us, and if He has to manipulate our choices to bring about His ends, then none of the above is really true. I said earlier that would make Him a puppet master, but maybe it’s worse. Maybe that would make Him a mere dictator who insists on His will by force, suggesting that might really does make right. DS lets me let go of such a monstrous God. It lets me cling to a God who simply is, whose plan, act, choice, and everything else simply is. And in light of that, I get to live. So do you. That, at bottom, makes God infinitely trustworthy and the true foundation on which to base your life, hope, and faith. He really is trustworthy because He is sovereign in His simplicity.

**God’s Omnipotence**

The idea that God is all-powerful can obviously be comforting. It means that no matter what you are facing, it’s not beyond God’s power to take care of it. As a chaplain, this is especially important to me. On the one hand, I believe God is powerful enough to heal people from the most dreadful illnesses. I’ve seen Him do just that on many occasions, and I give Him thanks, praise, and glory for it (but probably not as much as the people
healed and their families). On the other hand, I also believe that God is powerful enough to care for us even when He chooses not to heal (physically).

I’m concerned that we might be tempted to think of God’s power only when it comes to getting us out of this or that problem. But what if the problem remains? What if God doesn’t solve it? What if God says no, He will not cause the cup to pass from us? Is God powerful enough to take care of those consequences? I often tell my patients the story of Jesus calming the storm. Most of the time I hear that story preached I hear preachers encourage their congregations with the message, “God can calm the storms of your life!” True. But compare what Jesus and the disciples were doing as the waves crashed around them. They were panicked, but He was sleeping. They were worried. He was at peace. I ask my patients if perhaps the really important point of that isn’t that Jesus can calm the storms of our life, but rather that He can be our calm in the midst of our storms. After all, suppose Jesus’ hadn’t stopped the waves. Suppose the ship had sunk. Does anyone think Jesus and His followers would have drowned? Of course not! I think we can use a bit of sanctified imagination and suggest that Jesus would have just stood up on the waves, told His disciples to do the same, and just walked on over to the shore. Why? Because He is omnipotent. He can handle any consequences.

But you don’t need to believe in DS to believe that, do you? Strictly speaking, of course not. But I think God’s simplicity puts what we are saying in a clearer light. Omnipotence doesn’t just mean that God can do anything. It’s that anything that can happen or actually happens only happens because God, as the first cause, is bringing it about. God doesn’t just have the power to do this or that. He is the power to do this or that. That means that every single thing about you, from the words you are reading in front of you to the breath you are taking, is there and happening because of God. That’s pretty closely tied to sovereignty. And that means that when you ask God to act, you aren’t merely asking God to intervene in something outside of His control. You are asking Him to be God, to bring about something. But even more, in light of what we said above, you can say, “Thy will be done,” because you can know that no matter what God says, He is with you in whatever happens, for nothing happens apart from Him.

I grant this raises questions about why God lets bad things happen. We don’t have the space to get into that here. I’ve addressed that some in my book A Reason for Hope. But for now, I’d only ask you to imagine the alternative. If God is not behind even the bad things, then that would mean that those things are outside of His control. For God

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19 While, again, I don’t have the space to develop this thought here, I would only remind you that for God to be behind something it does not follow that He is responsible for it. I refer you back to the chapter on human freedom. Responsibility is related to free choices, and remember that God brings about our choices in accordance with their natures; that is, He makes freely chosen things happen freely. Accordingly, it is we who
to intervene, He would have to be viewed as an external agent imposing Himself on a foreign body, and now we’re right back to “might makes right.” But if you can allow yourself to see God in absolutely everything—every thought, every sound, every taste, every sight, every sense, every event—then you can truly see that nothing is or can be more powerful than faith. For faith is nothing more than trusting God to act. If I ask, and if God says “yes,” then what can stop Him? The very request was of Him!

Before I leave off this, I want to remind you that this means that we can classify God’s acts in one of three categories. First, there are those things He chooses to do and give us whether we like it or not. I hope you can see that there is a lot of grace in that statement. Second, there are those things He chooses not to do or give us, no matter how much we beg and plead. Again, I hope you can see that there can be a lot of grace in that statement, too. And finally, there are those things that God chooses to give us through our prayers. And it is here that Divine Simplicity, prayer, omnipotence, and faith all meet. For if God declares, “If he asks for X, he will have it,” then in asking I cannot fail to receive what God has promised. But if I do not ask, I do not receive. God knows all of this from eternity, of course. But that only shows that His grace goes beyond even what we ask for. How much have we not received simply because we did not ask? It was in God’s power to grant it. He would have, for God’s very essence—His very existence—is to bring about what He wills. All the more reason, then, for us to pray, “Thy will be done,” and to seek daily that will.

God’s Omnipresence

As soon as we start thinking about God’s nature in terms of His bringing everything into existence, we can’t help but notice we’re now talking about His omnipresence. When we say that God is everywhere, are we really trying to “locate” God here or there? Let’s not be silly. God can’t be contained in any spot—not your heart, not even in the whole universe. But God is also not some extended substance, like an invisible fog filling everything, in which part of Him is here and part of Him is there. On DS, God’s omnipresence isn’t some mysterious, “magical” notion that God is somehow in two places at the same time. It isn’t a metaphorical way of saying that God sees everything and in that sense is “there.” If DS is true, we can see that God’s omnipresence means that everywhere and everything that is, is because God is. You can’t go anywhere that God isn’t because in order for there to be a “where” God must be “there” causing it to be. That even extends to your very existence. You really are in His hands, being upheld by Him at each and every moment. That means God is never far, no matter how you might feel.

make the choices that God brings about who are responsible both for them and for their consequences.
That strikes me as really important. There are times when I don’t feel close to God. Maybe more honestly I should say that there are times when I don’t feel like He’s close to me. Now, I think that all of us go through that. It’s so popular that there’s an old story called “Footprints” about a person walking along a beach reviewing his life with God. At the end of the review, he asked God why at the hardest parts there was only one set of footprints in the sand rather than two—both his and God’s. You likely know the ending. God assures the man that in those hard times the one set of prints was His own and that God was carrying him through the pain.

It’s a lovely story. Inspiring and comforting even. But I think it is especially powerful when we meditate on the fact that God just is Existence In Itself, that every atom of my body exists only because God is fully present causing each one—causing me—to be. When we think about that, we can realize that God is in a very real sense closer to you than your breath is to your body or even your body to your very soul. If DS is true, God is here, because there cannot be a “here” without the full, absolute, undivided attention of the Creator God Himself. You can know that no matter how you feel, God has never abandoned you. He will never leave you or forsake you. In fact, as long as there’s a you to wonder if God is there, then you can be assured that He is.

One more bit of theological reflection: I, for one, don’t think this applies only to Christians. This is a general truth. From a biblical perspective, it’s true that Christians have a special, unbreakable relationship with God through faith in Christ. That relationship is enhanced by DS, because it means that special presence is always there. Yet Christians can also take special comfort in knowing that God is there in a very real way—in the realest way possible—even for those who have never trusted Christ, too. He is at work in their lives, at their side, and loving them each and every moment of their existence. That, I believe, is nothing more than God’s grace in action.

God’s Omniscience

The next attribute I want to consider in light of DS is God’s omniscience. Again, our ideas here should come pretty naturally out of what we just said about His omnipresence.

Let’s put it this way: if everything exists because God causes it, then what could there be that God doesn’t know? Nothing! And we can go further. Since God is absolutely free to decide what He will do, to decide what will be, then not only does God know all that is, but He knows all that could have been. In short, in knowing Himself and what He is, God knows everything that is or could be.

I think there are two important points that come from this. First, God does not know us because we exist, but rather, we exist because God knows us. Just as God told Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:5), He knew you long
before you existed. That means you are not an accident. You are here because God wanted you to be. That doesn’t just stop at your birth, either. There’s never been a time when God was surprised or taken off guard by you. God has never turned to the angels and said, “Oh, no! I didn’t see that coming. What am I going to do?” He knows what He’s going to do from now until forever and even how He’s going to answer prayers you haven’t asked yet. That means you can trust Him.

I think that raises another point worth considering, too. Strictly speaking, God knows all things in virtue of knowing Himself. But we also know God. Does that mean that we, too, know all things? Obviously not. The real issue is one of degrees. I’ve argued throughout this book that God is infinite and simple. All created things, though, are finite a complex creatures. We just can’t fully grasp, comprehend, or know the infinite God.

Notice the word “fully.” We can have greater or lesser understandings of Him. The greatest of sages or saints who know God more fully than any other human know next to nothing when compared to what God knows about Himself. But what they know isn’t nothing, and at it certainly may be far more than what the rest of us know. There is a real sense, I believe, in which to know God is to have a deeper understanding of life itself. Those who know Him better know life more deeply.

But let me quickly add a few qualifiers to that. First, I don’t think that knowing God more fully will give you the answers to mathematical or scientific questions (although for reasons I won’t get into here, I think it could well be possible that knowing God could make you more open to those “flashes of inspiration” in which discovery or enlightenment comes). The real knowledge I have in mind isn’t of specific problems but rather is of a more general nature, what used to be called “wisdom.” God has all wisdom. He also has all knowledge of all particular problems. But we will just never know God that fully. Still, to be wiser is good no matter who we are.

Second, when I talk about “knowing God,” I’m not talking about understanding speculative theology or philosophy. You could memorize all the arguments in this book and know them like the back of your hand. You could go far beyond them and become a great theologian. But that doesn’t mean that you “know God.” You might know about Him, but the knowledge that comes from seeing His essence comes from knowing Him. And that requires much more than memorizing the words and ideas of theologians and philosophers. In biblical language, it requires discipleship. It requires allowing yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit. It requires abiding in Christ.

Finally, I don’t believe that even the holiest of us in this life can have a very clear knowledge of God Himself. As Paul says, in this life, we see dimly as through dark glass (1 Cor. 13:12). It will only be in the next life, in the resurrection, that we see Him fully, that we can really know Him. Catholic theologians call that the Beatific Vision. Yet I
should also note that, apparently, not all in the next life will see God as clearly. Some will see Him and know Him more and will be able to enjoy that forever. Others will see Him but not as clearly. What they do know they will see and enjoy forever. I am of the opinion that this is really getting to the heart of the biblical doctrine of rewards in heaven.

The bottom line is that knowing God does promise to be the key to knowing all things. How deeply we know them—we know Him—will depend fully on how we live in this life, how we exercise our faith, and the kind of fruit we bear. I think we can have a taste of that on this side of the grave (so see 1 John 2:27), but it will ultimately be experienced in our glorification, when Jesus calls us from the dead.

**God’s Immutability**

We’ve looked at God’s sovereignty and the big “Omnis” (omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience). Now I want to look at God’s immutability, the fact that He never changes. This is another idea that has come up repeatedly in this book. Over and over, I’ve argued that if something suggests that God even could change then it can’t be true. God is absolutely, radically immutable. He just is what He is, and being what He is, He can’t be other than that. He doesn’t gain anything. He doesn’t lose anything. Nothing benefits Him. No one can take anything from Him. He exists in a single dynamic act of pure, divine bliss.

There is a lot I could say here. It would be easy to talk about how this makes God trustworthy. Since God never changes, since He is the same today as He was yesterday and will remain the same tomorrow, then we can know that His promises never fail. That’s a lesson the Bible preaches repeatedly. So learn it, and learn to live by it. If you can’t do anything else, learn to trust God no matter what, and whatever happens, you will be okay.

As important as that is, I want to offer you a different observation. Look again at the last sentence a couple of paragraphs above. God “exists in a single dynamic act of pure, divine bliss.” That’s a theological way of saying (or maybe just a wannabe-theologian’s way of saying) that God is happy.

They may not sound so profound. But stop and let your mind dwell on that. He is happy—inevitability, unchangingly, perfectly, and absolutely happy. I know people who think about God as an angry, bitter, reactive judge. A lot of people—in my experience, conservative, evangelical Christians in particular—insist they believe that God loves them. I’m sure they do believe it. But many of those same people either live in fear of God or afraid that God is just waiting for the chance to pounce on them the moment they make a mistake. Not surprisingly, such people could tend to see and treat others the same way. They insist that we love each other even as they are quick to judge.
I think God’s immutability, though, makes a mockery out of that view of Him, and by extension, of that view of others. God’s life is so full and perfect and filled with love and joy that you couldn’t disturb it if you tried. And He knows that. So what has He done?

He’s offered to let you join in His peace and joy, in Hebrew, in His shalom. We cannot be immutable as He is, but if God is at perfect peace, then we have a steady rock we can stand on.

There is an idea I was trained in and have come to love called “systems theory.” I can’t get into it here, but suffice it to say that I think it offers us profound ways to put our faith in action, bear real fruit, and find real peace (I would highly recommend anyone go read either Peter Steinke’s How Your Church Works or Edwin Friedman’s Generation to Generation for a primer on the idea). I’ll only offer you this illustration that I think sums up most of the concept pretty well. Suppose you and a friend are each holding on end of a solid stick as picture below. If you move your hand—perhaps you push your hand forward or pull yours back—what will it cause your friend’s hand to do? Move also, right? So long as you and your friend are holding to the solid stick, you can control where the other person’s hand is by how and where you hold your own.

But now suppose that rather than holding two ends of a stick, you are holding two ends of a rope. Now what happens to your friend’s hand if you push or pull yours? Assuming that there is some slack in the string, then nothing at all. Your friend can choose to move his hand in response if he likes. Or he can choose to hold perfectly still. Suddenly, you aren’t in control of him in the same way you were before. In fact, the longer the string is, the less control either of you have over one another, even though you are connected.

I would submit to you that, in large part because of God’s immutability, our relationship with Him is more like the second example than the first. We can do whatever we like. We can sing His praises, worship, and adore Him. We can love Him and follow Him. Though that is what we ought to do, we should know that isn’t going to move Him any more than moving my hand will move my friend’s if we are holding opposite ends of a lose string. The same holds true with other actions. I could curse God. I could shake my
fist at Him. I could question and threaten Him. How much do you think that moves Him? How much is He changed?

Exactly none. God is not reactive to us in the least. He is completely free to act as He sees fit. He is “connected” to us, of course. But our actions don’t move Him and force Him to react. He just continues to be exactly what He is.

And that is something I think we can have in our own lives. When someone insults you, it probably hurts you, drives you to anger, makes you feel compelled to react. In that moment, far from being like God, who is absolutely immutable, whose peace and joy cannot be disturbed, who is connected to us firmly as if by a slack rope, we are more like those connected by a rigid stick. They push, and we are compelled to back away. They pull away, we are compelled to try to get closer. They insult, we react. They praise, and we still react. In short, we give other people an amazing amount of control over us every day. And why? Because we aren’t in control over ourselves, over our potential to be other than what we are. So we let others determine it for us.

We can never be immutable, but I think God’s immutability can teach us a lot about our relationships. He is at peace enough in Himself to give us unlimited grace. Perhaps if we can be at peace enough in ourselves, through faith in Christ and the knowledge of God’s unconditional love for us, we can give others enough grace—we can be connected to them by loose string rather than rigid stick—to act as they will and then we can decide how we choose to be, guided by our reason and, of course, the prompting of God Himself through the Holy Spirit.

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We could spend pages more, maybe even fill a second book, looking at ways in which DS promotes a deeper, more vibrant faith. I hope the brief discussion about offers some concrete examples to help you meditate on this doctrine more deeply. But before I close this chapter, I want to offer one more general qualifier.

If you’re still a critic of DS, you probably couldn’t help but notice that you don’t have to believe that God is simple to embrace any of the devotional points above. There’s nothing keeping you from holding some or all of these while rejecting DS. But let’s return to the idea of God as the Moral Lawgiver. It’s clear that atheists and pagans alike can be moral people. They can recognize right and wrong and behave in a moral way just as well as any Christian. In fact, many of them may be far more moral than the most strident evangelical. Yet does that mean that you don’t need God to be good?

No, it doesn’t. It’s important to recognize that if you take God out of the equation, then there is no basis for believing in real right and wrong. Atheists know murder is wrong. But ask them why. Because it hurts someone? But why is hurting someone wrong?
Because it treats someone the way you wouldn’t want to be treated (the Golden Rule, right)? Fine, but who says that is true? Moral people like Jesus? Why should we believe Him? If He isn’t God, then He’s just a wise man at best, and look where His wisdom got Him (hanging on a cross!).

Do we base our beliefs of right and wrong on what society says? But what if society disagrees with us? Do we look at our instincts and evolutionary conditioning? Fine, we can admit that evolution might have conditioned us to take care of each other because of the benefit to the species, but why shouldn’t we just ignore those old instincts and do what we want? What makes that wrong? Maybe because we don’t want to break the law. But plenty of people think that laws are wrong and so they fight to change them.

Do we say might makes right, that something is wrong if you have the power to enforce your will? That’s obviously not right. Dictators can enforce their will, and often times we regard what they do and did as wrong.

We could continue, but I hope you get the point. Unless you have a Moral God who just is goodness, then the whole notion of a real right and wrong is just silly. Shy of such a God, right and wrong is little more than personal or societal preference. In this sense, without God you can’t be good, because good doesn’t exist.

This forms the basis of what is called the moral law for God’s existence. The argument is that if real, objective morality exists, then a Moral God exists; and, of course, real, objective morality does exist; therefore, a Moral God exists. Now, my point here isn’t to give you an argument for God’s existence. It’s to point out that whether or not a person accepts the conclusion or understands the argument, even if they reject God’s existence, they can still enjoy and appeal to the reality of objective morality.

That gets us to the point I want you to see: you don’t have to know or accept the source of an idea to believe in and make use of the idea itself. Just as if I’m thirsty I can drink water from a fountain without knowing where the water comes from, in a similar way I can believe in a real right and wrong without seeing its connection to God. And if that’s true about God as Moral Lawgiver, it’s also just as true about His Simplicity. I mean that it is His Simplicity that grounds His sovereignty, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and immutability. We can believe in all those things without believing in DS. But the one who does so needs to ground those ideas in something else other than mere assertion. On the other hand, if we accept DS, then not only do we have all of those very powerful ideas, but we have them united together in a particularly powerful way, a way that, if we stop and think and meditate on it, can draw us closer to the God we believe in, live for, serve, and worship.
Conclusion

It’s been a long road. Making Divine Simplicity Simple hasn’t been very simple, not for me, and I suspect not for you, either. Still, I hope you’ve come to appreciate the centrality of the doctrine. I hope you’ve come to grasp the importance of God as Creator, as first cause, of the One that Causes All. I hope in seeing that, maybe for the first time, that your faith is strengthened.

I want to close this book on a personal note. I’ve always loved theology. I was in the sixth grade when I got my first theological book, and the next year I read C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* for the first time. (I made it a point to reread that one annually for almost ten years, by the way.) I accepted a formal call to ministry when I was eighteen and went on to earn three theological degrees. I now work as a cardiac chaplain in a Catholic hospital. I sit every day at the bedside of sick and dying people. Having learned all that I have and doing the work I do, I would like to rip James 2:14ff out of context and offer something of a twist on it: “What good is it, my brother and sister, if someone says they have good theology but that theology doesn’t do anything? Can such a theology save them? . . . I will show you my theology by what I do, because even the demons believe the right things, and they even shudder!” In short, if faith without works is dead, then a theology that doesn’t do anything is worse than worthless. It’s positively harmful, because the time you spent learning it—and learning theology is hard work—could have been spent loving others.

It should go without saying that, for me, Divine Simplicity isn’t a theology that doesn’t do anything. Far from it, there are two doctrines that have done more than all others to shape my love for God and my deep belief in His goodness and trustworthiness. First, of course, is the gospel—that by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone I have life that can never end. Jesus said that every single person who believes in Him (not believes *and*) has everlasting life (not temporary life – see John 6:47). I’ve believed in Jesus, so I know that I will live forever, and that makes me love God more than I could ever tell you.

The second doctrine, as you might expect given the time I took to write this book, is Divine Simplicity. For it is in DS that I see not just what God does, but what God is. My times of quiet meditation are infinitely more meaningful. As I ponder the very notion of existence itself, everything around me becomes evidence for God. More than that, everything around me becomes His very work, an act of grace and goodness. There are times I feel Him with every breath, with every thought, with every sound. There are times He is more real to me than I am to myself, because I have become so deeply aware that whatever is, it only is because God is—He is right there, in that moment, in that place, fully present in all of His infinite majesty.
DS invites me to go beyond theology, and that’s how I want to finish this work. I want to invite you to go further. I’m not asking you to go read more books on theology and philosophy. I’m sure you will. This won’t be the last book you’ll ever read (I hope not, anyway!). What I’m asking you to do is to go beyond the words on these pages, beyond an idea, and ponder the reality that these words point to—a reality that these words can never really capture.

I’ve often said to those I work with that there are two “Gods” I believe in. The first is the “God” we’ve spent the last fourteen chapters talking about. We might call Him “the God of reason” or “the God of natural theology.” This “God” is really no god at all. He is an idea. Better, He is an assortment of ideas, my attempt to get my ideas in the right order, related to each other in the right way. This “God” is sign. But like any sign, the important thing is not the sign itself but the reality it points to and the authority it represents. And what this “God” points to is this second and true God.

The first “God” is known by reason. I am convinced that everything we have said about Him is true. But it is only true as far as it goes. The reality to which He points is the real deal. He is the God that cannot be expressed in words or known by reason. He is the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Jesus. He is the God who said “Let there be light” and the one who forgives us of our sins. This God is known by faith. He goes beyond our mere words, and faith lets Him be what He is, far beyond our most eloquent attempts to describe Him.

But if faith is all that is needed, then why fourteen chapters on an abstract doctrine like Divine Simplicity? Because, I believe, that the more we understand about the first God, the more fully we can allow ourselves to entrust ourselves to the second, the real, God. I am persuaded that what you think about God may be a small fraction of what you actually think about, but it is by far more important than all the rest combined. Your views of God will determine everything about who you are, what you believe, how you treat others, and even how you see yourself. It is absolutely imperative, therefore, that what we say about God is true—that our knowledge of the first God transitions us seamlessly into a relationship with the second.

My hopes are, perhaps, too high, but that’s what I want for you after having read this book. I hope and pray that when you put this down, you will see the world around you as if for the first time, and that behind and in everything, you will see God as never before. Yet at the same time you will see an unbridgeable chasm between God as you understand Him with your mind—a God whom you describe in such terms as Simplicity and omniscience and omnipotence and so on—and the God you know by faith. I pray that you will find yourself being able to entrust yourself to Him, and in doing so, that you will truly come to know God. I believe that if you do that, you’ll never cease to be amazed at who He is, what He is, and what He will do in and through you.