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Divine Simplicity as a Necessary Condition for Affirming Creation Ex Nihilo

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ABSTRACT

Proponents of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) have frequently argued that God must lack any temporal, physical, or metaphysical composition on the grounds that God's *existence* would be dependent upon God's parts. This avenue of discourse has been tried and trod so often that most detractors of DDS find it insufficient to demonstrate DDS. Additionally, objectors to DDS have often rejected the doctrine on the count of the heap of metaphysical (often Aristotelian or Neoplatonist) assumptions that one must make before one can even arrive at DDS. Within this essay I will offer an argument for DDS that is advanced on the grounds of neither (1) arguing that a composite God's *existence* would be dependent upon its parts and must be rejected, nor (2) made with a host of controversial metaphysical assumptions. I will presuppose modest metaphysical commitments and argue for DDS on the grounds of *creation ex nihilo*. The heart of my argument will be to (1) advance a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo*, and (2) deduce that from such a notion of creation *ex nihilo*, that a God who creates *ex nihilo* cannot be composite.

Divine Simplicity as a Necessary Condition for Affirming Creation *ex Nihilo*

A Thesis

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To Rafael, Rita, Fred, Desiree, and Austin.

You each are necessary grounds for my completion of this project.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Research Question

What view of God follows from a historically informed definition of creation *ex nihilo*? Creation *ex nihilo* is the notion that God creates the world (constituent parts and all) out of nothing.[1] Regarding creation *ex nihilo*, the Christian tradition has largely been committed to the view that God does not make use of non-divine intermediaries when creating the world. Behind this assumption, often lies a robust notion of divine *aseity* and/or omnipotence.[2] Thus, at the heart of creation *ex nihilo* seems to be a concern of maintaining God's role as the sole and sovereign creator of the universe. As my driving question (stated above) indicates, I have an acute interest in determining what a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo* entails about one's conception of God. In particular, what implications does creation *ex nihilo* hold for disputes concerning the simplicity of God?

Proposal

The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (henceforth, DDS) is the notion that God is not composed of any physical, temporal, or metaphysical parts. DDS has recently drawn a

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1. Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 1.

2. McFarland (*From Nothing*, 94) argues that God uses nothing apart from God to create the world. Also, Gerhard May notes that creation ex nihilo entails that God's omnipotence is the sole ground of the world's creation. See Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), xi.

substantial degree of criticism from analytic philosophers in particular.[3] This thesis will argue that a commitment to a historically informed definition of creation *ex nihilo* necessarily entails a commitment to DDS.[4] While most proponents of DDS have been somewhat on the defensive in responding to recent criticisms, this work represents an attempt to go on the offensive and offer an argument *for* DDS instead of merely defending it from its critics. In terms of the structure, therefore, the thesis will have four crucial features. First, I will present a formally valid logical argument for my conclusion.[5] The argument that will be employed will run as follows:

1. If God's creative action must be derived from something that is not-God, then God cannot create *ex nihilo*

2. If God is composed of parts, then God's creative action must be derived from something that is not-God (i.e., from at least one of God's parts)

3. God does create *ex nihilo*

4. Therefore, it is not the case that God's creative action must be derived from something that is not-God

5. Therefore, God is not composed of parts.

The validity of the argument above can be demonstrated by showing that both of the inferences are valid. In variable form, the argument runs as follows:

1. $D \supset \neg X$

2. $C \supset D$

3. For example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature: The Aquinas Lecture, 1980* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

4. I would like to thank Austin McCoy for helping me articulate my claim.

5. This argument is inspired by a similar argument from the blog of Alexander Pruss: "Divine Simplicity and Aristotelian Metaphysics," *Alexander Pruss's Blog*, 28 February 2010, http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2010/02/divine-simplicity-and-aristotelian.html.

3. X (or ¬ ¬X)

4. ∴ ¬D (from 1 and 3)

5. ∴ ¬C (from 2 and 4)

Here, D stands in for "God's creative actions must be derived from something that is not-God," X stands in for "God creates *ex nihilo*," and C stands in for "God composed of parts." The inference of premise 4 from 1 and 3 is a form of *modus tollens* involving double negation.[6] It is the logical equivalent to the following inference:

1. If there is a void, then no thing can be moved[7]

2. It is not the case that no thing can be moved

3. Therefore, there is no void

Additionally, the inference to premise 5 from 2 and 4 is a plain example of *modus tollens*. Taken in isolation it will look as such:

1. C ⊃ D

2. ¬D

3. ∴ ¬C

Thus, it can be seen that the argument I will present in this thesis is logically valid. By implication, then, the argument must be objected to on the grounds concerning the plausibility of its premises and not its validity. Since my argument is aimed at those who are already sympathetic to creation *ex nihilo*, premise 3 will be presupposed. Thus, my thesis will largely be devoted to defending premises 1 and 2.

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6. See Robert M. Johnson, *A Logic Book: Fundamentals of Reasoning*, 3rd ed. (New York: Wadsworth, 1999), 188.

7. Ibid., 160.

To this end, my second objective will be to advance the claim that a doctrine creation *ex nihilo* that is informed by the Christian tradition and its assumptions concerning the doctrine (mentioned above) must hold that God is the *only* ground for the creation of the world.[8] From this, premise 1 follows. Third, I will argue that all views of God that stipulate God as having *real* parts will entail that God is not the only ground for the creation of the world. This entails the truth of premise 2. From this, with the assumption that the world is created *ex nihilo*, follows my claim that God must be simple. Fourth, having already addressed some objections to my argument in particular, I will address some relevant objections to divine simplicity generally.

This argument will differ from traditional arguments for DDS in two ways. First, it will not draw directly from the doctrine of divine aseity. The standard line of argument in favor of divine simplicity is to infer the doctrine from divine aseity.[9] In this respect, classical theists maintain that the doctrine of divine aseity necessarily entails DDS. The traditional rationale for the doctrine of divine simplicity is that if God is composed of parts (of any kind, be they temporal, physical, or ontological), then this would imply that God's existence is contingent upon something more fundamental (or "absolute") than God. This has been the rationale that has been advanced by thinkers both within and outside of the Christian tradition. The ancient Neoplatonist Plotinus, for example, held that the One (his ontological ground of being) must be utterly and absolutely non-

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8. Additionally, while some Christian thinkers (e.g., Aquinas) have held that creation *ex nihilo* is compatible with an eternal universe, this thesis will not rule on the matter. For our purposes, we will assume that God creates the universe in the sense that it has an absolute beginning.

9. Alvin Plantinga concedes as much in *Does God have a Nature* (28–9).

composite.[10] This is because a composite presupposes (and is dependent upon) the

existence of its parts.[11] Thomas Aquinas has a similar rationale when he notes that if God

is composed of parts, since God cannot be predicated of any one of God's parts, then

God's parts would not be fully God.[12] This would entail that some aspect of God is not

fully divine.[13] Contemporary classical theists advance a similar line of argument. All of

these lines of argumentation are informed by the doctrine of divine aseity. As Katherin

Rogers notes,

> In order to be perfect God must not depend for His existence on anything
> else. He must exist absolutely *a se*, from Himself. But if we posit that God
> *has* properties of (for example) wisdom, power and goodness, and indeed
> *must* have them in order to exist as God, but we hold that these are not
> identical with Him, then are we not forced to the conclusion that God's
> existence is dependent upon things other than Himself?[14]

This classical theistic line of reasoning concerning the contingency of ontological

composites will prove to be indirectly informative to this thesis. The thinkers that will be

most operative within this thesis will be Plotinus and Thomas Aquinas. While this thesis

will make use of these sources, my argument will only subtly be informed by such

thinkers while applying their same concerns to divine creative action rather than aseity. In

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10. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "Plotinus on Divine Simplicity" (lecture presented at the Divine Simplicity Conference, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, 19 March 2015), 5, https://www.academia.edu/10063215/ Plotinus_on_Divine_Simplicity_paper_presented_at_the_Divine_Simplicity_Conference_Wheaton_Colleg e_Wheaton_IL_March_19_2015.

11. Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus*, ed. Ted Honderich, Arguments of the Philosophers (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.

12. Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 96.

13. Ibid, 96.

14. Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 25.

contrast to the traditional manner of arguing for DDS on grounds of divine aseity, I hope to show that DDS follows from a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo*.

Second, robust metaphysical commitments often employed by classical theists (e.g., Aristotelian-Thomist assumptions about the world) are not necessary to advance the claim of this argument. While some classical theists, broadly speaking, and Thomists, particularly speaking, have made arguments for divine simplicity from such metaphysical commitments, this argument will be slightly different insofar as it will not make use of robust Platonic/Aristotelian metaphysics that many classical views have *and* that it will emphasize that divine creative action (rather than existence) must be derived from God and God alone. Thus, my argument will not hinge on the assumptions of the real distinction of act/potency or essence/existence.[15] While my proposal will be loosely informed by classical theists, it will not be necessary to buy into the metaphysical commitments of these writers for the argument to succeed.

Methodology

This thesis will employ insights from history and analytic philosophy. With regards to history, it will be important to establish the presence of a vein within Christian theology that affirms that creation *ex nihilo* entails that God must not make use of any non-divine means in his creative actions. After establishing the historical precedence of this assumption the thesis will take a philosophical turn. The primary task of this thesis will be to philosophically demonstrate the necessity of divine simplicity entailed by the constraints of the established historical assumptions. Since this argument is intended to show that DDS can be demonstrated without appeals to Aristotelian or Neoplatonic

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15. That is not to say that such distinctions may not be possible *implications* of my argument or that my argument does not lend itself to support such real distinctions.

concepts, I will draw primarily from recent work in analytic metaphysics, with a particular focus on the notion of grounds, and mereology. The language of "parts" employed within the formal argument will convey the same meaning as "proper parts" within the field of mereology. Of paramount concern will be the relation of proper parts to wholes in the actions of beings.[16]

Chapters

Within this first chapter, I have sought to establish my research question, lay out my proposal, summarize my methodology, and highlight how I hope this work might contribute to scholarship. The second chapter of this thesis will attempt to demonstrate the plausibility of the first premise of my argument by offering a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo* and employing the metaphysical concept of grounds. My third chapter will argue that a God composed of parts cannot create *ex nihilo* and, thus, establish the truth of my second premise. Since this argument is aimed at those who already hold to creation *ex nihilo*, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer an argument *for* creation *ex nihilo*. As such, creation *ex nihilo* will be assumed for our purposes. Within my fourth chapter, I will address the implications and objections to DDS, generally. And, lastly, I will summarize my overall argument while mentioning some areas for further research within my concluding chapter.

Contribution to Scholarship

This thesis will contribute to scholarship in three related ways. First, it offers an alternative avenue for classical theists to use when arguing for divine simplicity. Second,

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16. While my argument is at least peripherally concerned with divine action, perhaps my focus on "God's creative action" would be more aptly characterized as broadly focused on the grounds for the creation event and God's creative capacities.

this argument will present new challenges for detractors of DDS. This thesis is inspired

by a similar argument by Alexander Pruss.[17] But, unlike Pruss, this argument is not as

much concerned with *what* God creates, so much as with *how* God creates.[18] If God *does*

create *anything ex nihilo*, then certain necessary conditions must be met for that act to be

a bona fide instance of creation *ex nihilo*. Third, my argument will offer a uniquely

Christian take on why the only form of realism concerning properties, essences, divine

ideas, and abstract objects would be one that is couched in DDS. This is because all

realist positions about properties, essences, etc. will undermine the doctrine of creation *ex*

nihilo. The only way for a Christian committed to a historically informed conception of

creation *ex nihilo* who wishes to avoid DDS, then, would be to take up an extreme form

of nominalism.

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17. Pruss, "Divine Simplicity and Aristotelian Metaphysics."

18. One of the premises within Pruss's argument states that "God creates everything other than God." My argument relies on a slightly different premise (premise 1). The argument within this thesis is dependent upon certain conditions that must apply if God creates anything *ex nihilo*. It will be beyond the scope of this thesis to actually demonstrate that God does create anything *ex nihilo*. Thus, this argument is intended to appeal to those who would already accept the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and the assumptions held by the Christian tradition concerning the doctrine.

CHAPTER II

GOD AS THE SOLE GROUND OF THE WORLD'S CREATION

Introduction

In this chapter, I will argue that a necessary condition for creation *ex nihilo* is that God's creative capacities must be wholly underived. This chapter will be divided into a major and minor section. Within the major section I will offer an argument for why God's creative action must be wholly underived. This follows from two reasons: First, if God creates *ex nihilo*, then the means by which God creates cannot be something that is not divine. This can be demonstrated from a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo*. There is a prominent vein present within the Christian tradition that attests to the truth of this premise. Second, if God's creative action must be grounded/derived from something that is not-God, then the means by which God creates must be something that is not divine. From this, the first premise of the overall argument follows: If God's creative action must be derived from something that is not-God, then God cannot create *ex nihilo*. Within the minor section of this chapter, I will offer some supplemental reasons for holding to the truth of the argument's first premise. In particular, I will argue that if one is interested in maintaining a conception of creation *ex nihilo* that does not contradict other traditional divine attributes (e.g., aseity and sovereignty), then one has reason to accept the argument's first premise. Each of these sections, taken cumulatively, bolster the plausibility of the first premise.

Defining "Means"

Before venturing into what the Christian tradition has to say about God's use of

means in creation *ex nihilo*, it is important to note how I am defining the notion of

"means." For the purpose of this thesis, I will take the inspiration for my definition of

"means" from Ron Highfield.[1] By "means" I am simply referring to what Highfield calls

"the how" concerning an agent's actions.[2] Highfield notes that if he tells the reader that

he lifted a car "six inches off the driveway to change a tire," one will presume that he

employed a certain means.[3] In other words, a means is (in part) what enables/grounds an

agent's actions.[4] Additionally, I hold that a means is something that must be employed by

an intentional agent with control over their actions.[5] Thus, when I use a knife to cut a

cantaloupe, while I may/may not have direct control over the knife (my control is,

presumably, mediated through my hands), I am still acting as an agent when employing

the knife as a means. Additionally, I am intentionally defining means broadly. Depending

on the action in question, a means could be an external instrument, a limb, or even one's

whole self. This is mostly for heuristic purposes, given that my chief concern with means

is "the how" concerning an agent's actions.[6] Thus, a means is something that grounds an

agent's action that the agent intentionally employs. This is important because grounds

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1. Ron Highfield, *The Faithful Creator: Affirming Creation and Providence in an Age of Anxiety* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 82–3.

2. Ibid., 82–3.

3. Ibid, 83.

4. There will be a more thorough discussion of grounds later in the chapter.

5. George Wilson and Samuel Shpall, "Action," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2016, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/.

6. Thus, my intention is not to offer some formalized theory of instruments or tools, for example.

and means ought not to be seen as symmetrical concepts, but rather, distinct ones. Additionally, grounds need not be actively employed by agents, whereas means must be. For example, the fact that it is raining outside might be a partial ground for my fetching an umbrella, but it is not a means of my fetching the umbrella. Thus, the manner in which an agent's actions might be grounded is often passive (e.g., the rain is a ground for my fetching the umbrella). But means are things that are in the control of the agent and that are actively employed by the agent (be it direct/indirect or immediate/mediate control). For example, when I swing a baseball bat to hit a high and tight fastball, the bat is a grounds of my action, but it is also a means of my action. It is important to keep this distinction between grounds and means in mind as more will be said on this later in the chapter.

The Problem with Non-Divine Means for Creation *Ex Nihilo*
within the Christian Tradition

Having unpacked what is meant by "means," I can now illustrate that a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo* holds that God does not create the world via non-divine means. By this, of course, I do not mean that the whole of the Christian tradition attests to this, but, rather, that there is a strong vein within the Christian tradition that holds what is at least tantamount to this view. Additionally, my goal will not be to accurately exegete every jot and tittle of what these few witnesses said. Rather, my focus will be merely to show there is a significant line of Christian thinkers who have been committed to the idea that God's creation of the world *ex nihilo* precludes God's use of non-divine means. This will mitigate the risk that my argument is ad hoc or self-serving. It is to such a historical task, that I now turn.

Despite the fact that there were some Christian thinkers who held that God did make use of non-divine means in creating the world, we eventually see the rise of a theological trajectory that is bound to reject such conceptions of creation.[7] The student of Justin Martyr, Tatian, was the first major Christian thinker to have held that God not only created the world, but also created the matter from which the world was formed.[8] Tatian asserted that matter itself was created from God and God alone and "through no other."[9] Furthermore, Tatian saw God to be the creator of not only matter, but also the forms themselves.[10] As Craig notes, "Tatian rejected the notion that there is besides God any eternal, uncreated thing, even pure forms."[11] What lies at the heart of Tatian's rejecting God's use of non-divine means is the motivation that God is the sole unoriginate reality.[12]

The second-century Christian thinker, Irenaeus, takes a sharply distinct trajectory from earlier Christian thinkers who held that God created the world out of some primary matter. Irenaeus held that when God created the world, he did not stand in need of any intermediaries.[13] God did not need to make use of any angel in order to create the world,

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7. For instance, Justin Martyr held that God could have made use of primal matter to create all the cosmos. See Jaroslav Pelikan, "Creation and Causality in the History of Christian Thought," *JR* 40.4 (1960): 246–55.

8. Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 150.

9. Ibid., 151.

10. William Lane Craig, *God over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 35.

11. Ibid., 35.

12. From this point forward I will be employing "means" and "non-divine means" interchangeably, unless otherwise specified.

13. Denis Edwards, *Christian Understandings of Creation: The Historical Trajectory*, Christian Understandings Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 30.

for example.[14] Irenaeus rejects *both* God's use of some non-divine means in creating the world as well as God's creating some first intermediary that God subsequently used to create the world.[15] This is not to insinuate that Irenaeus held that God did not make use of *any* means in creating the world. Irenaeus seems to have been committed to the idea that God makes use of the Word and Spirit in a manner that is at least analogous to a means. In fact, Irenaeus depicts the Word and Spirit within the Triune life of God as the two "hands" that God uses to create the world.[16] Thus, Irenaeus is not opposed to God's use of *any* means, but he is opposed to any non-divine means. Irenaeus was committed to the notion that all creatures owed their entire existence to God's creative act.[17]

Another Christian thinker who was committed to the notion of creation *ex nihilo* was the third-century thinker, Tertullian of Carthage. Clifford states that within his *Treatise Against Hermogenes,* Tertullian notes that God's creation of the world must stem from either (1) God's creation out of himself, or (2) God's creation out of nothing, or (3) God's creation of the world out of some pre-existing matter.[18] Tertullian rejects (1) and (3) in favor of a view in which God creates the world *ex nihilo*. For Tertullian, if God were to create the world outside of some kind of matter, then matter would be superior to God; but this is obviously objectionable. Therefore, God must not create the world with matter.[19] Additionally, Tertullian notes that if God would have made the world out of

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14. Edwards, *Christian Understandings of Creation,* 30.

15. Ibid., 30.

16. Ibid., 32–33.

17. Ibid., 31.

18. Anne M. Clifford, "Creation," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis S. Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 216.

19. Ibid., 216.

matter, then the Scriptures would have indicated as much.[20] Since, however, they do not,

we have reason to hold that God did not make use of matter in creating the world. Thus,

we see that for Tertullian, God's use of means (in particular, material intermediaries) is

something that is precluded under creation *ex nihilo*.

Within Athanasius's *Discourse Against the Arians*, we see a rationale for rejecting

God's use of non-divine means. Athanasius writes:

> You said that He made for Himself His Son out of nothing, as an instrument
> whereby to make the universe. Which then is superior, that which needs or that
> which supplies the need? Or does not each supply the deficiency of the other?
> You rather prove the weakness of the Maker, if He had not power of Himself to
> make the universe, but provided for Himself an instrument from without, as a
> carpenter might do or shipwright, unable to work anything without adze and saw!
> Can anything be more irreligious?[21]

We see Athanasius rejecting God's use of an intermediary on the grounds that this would

imply a deficiency of God's power. For Athanasius, God stands in no need of anything in

addition to himself in order to create. God's power alone is sufficient to create the

cosmos.

Augustine of Hippo also held that God did not make use of means in creating the

world. Augustine noted that should the world have been created from the *very substance*

of God, then it would have an equal ontological status to the eternally begotten Son of

God (given that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father).[22] But, alternatively, if God's

creation of the world was aided by something that God did not create, then God would

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20. Clifford, "Creation," 216.

21. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.7.26 (*NPNF*[2] 4), http://www.newadvent.org/
fathers/28161.htm.

22. Clifford, "Creation," 218.

not be almighty.[23] Additionally, for Augustine God alone is the one who creates *ex nihilo*.[24] While mothers and fathers are creators in some sense, according to Augustine, because they derive their creative powers from God, they are not *true* creators.[25] Thus, for Augustine God's role as the ultimate first cause precluded the possibility of any other creator. Additionally, God's causal role necessitates that God did not make use of means in his act of creating.

Anselm of Canterbury is another prominent representative of the Christian tradition who rejected the possibility of God's creating via some intermediary in creation. Anselm argues, "Therefore the supreme essence cannot have made anything through something else (i.e., using it as a tool or assistant)—it can only have acted through itself."[26] Thus, at least within the *Monologion*, Anselm seems committed to the idea that God could not have made use of any instrument or "assistant" within his creation of the world. The divine essence presupposes nothing in addition to it in order to create the world.

Lastly, within the thought and writings of Thomas Aquinas as well, God's use of means is precluded in God's creation of the world *ex nihilo*. For Aquinas, it belongs to God and God alone to give *being* to creatures.[27] Aquinas notes that since creation presupposes *nothing*, then this nullifies the necessity of God's use of instruments in

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23. Clifford, "Creation," 218.

24. *Trin.* 3.9.16.

25. *Trin.* 3.9.16.

26. Anselm, *Monologion*, 7.

27. ST 1.45.5.

creation.[28] If God's creative action did presuppose *something* then God would not be the creator of *that* thing.[29] Thus, for Aquinas, God is the universal creator of the world. On the one hand, God does not make use of any instruments in creation and, on the other hand, God is the ultimate foundation for all of reality. In describing Aquinas's position on the matter, Tanner notes, "in God's case there are no materials; God's creation of the world presupposes nothing prior to it, upon which God works. And there are no tools, no means. Indeed, God creates the world without any intervening process at all, immediately. The rejection of creation on or by way of anything requires all such modification."[30] Thus it is clear that for Aquinas God does not make use of any means in creation *ex nihilo*.

A quick note ought to be made about Aquinas's conception of creation *ex nihilo* and divine ideas. Aquinas is committed to the notion that creation *ex nihilo* precludes God's use of intermediaries in creation. But how is this to be reconciled to the concept of divine ideas? It seems that for Aquinas, if divine ideas were something truly separate from God existing alongside God, then they could plausibly be a means of God in creation. Levering acknowledges the potential threat posed by divine ideas and the feat of creation *ex nihilo*. Levering asks, "Does Aquinas's doctrine of the divine ideas reduce the living God's creative work to the production of a mere copy of a deterministic divine

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28. ST 1.45.5.

29. ST 1.45.2.

30. Kathryn Tanner, "The Foolishness and Wisdom of All God's Ways: The Case of Creation Ex Nihilo," in *The Wisdom and Foolishness of God: First Corinthians 1–2 in Theological Exploration*, ed. Christophe Chalamet and Hans-Christoph Askani (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 281–2.

template?"[31] Levering, in summarizing Aquinas's position and the broad trajectory of

Thomistic thinking on the relationship between divine ideas and creation *ex nihilo*,

answers in the negative. For Levering, divine ideas are a threat to creation *ex nihilo* if,

and only if, they are something that is impersonal and distinct from God.[32] However, the

Thomistic tradition has broadly resisted such a characterization. As Gilson and Ross

argue, Aquinas's position is that the object of God's knowledge is, in fact, simply God

himself.[33] This does seem to reflect Aquinas's own thinking on the matter. For Aquinas,

God's knowledge of the divine ideas does not necessitate many "images" within the mind

of God, but only one: the divine essence and the many ways in which it can be imitated.[34]

As Panchuk qualifies, while God knows the many ways in which the divine essence can

be imitated, the object of God's knowledge is God.[35] Thus we can see that for Aquinas, a

commitment to a realist conception of divine ideas does not conflict with his view that

God must not make use of any means in creating the world *ex nihilo*.

From what has been shown here, each of these witnesses from the Christian

tradition at least hold that God's creative act is not grounded in something that is not-God

that God actively employs to create. But this is the very definition of means I offered

above. Thus, we see strong representation within the Christian tradition of the view that

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31. Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 53–4.

32. Ibid., 56.

33. Ibid., 56.

34. ST 1. 15. 2.

35. Michelle Panchuk, "The Simplicity of Divine Ideas" (unpublished paper), 16, https://www.academia.edu/30372564/The_Simplicity_of_Divine_Ideas, 16.

creation *ex nihilo* precludes what I have dubbed non-divine means.[36] It is worth noting

that *non-divine* means is an important distinction to maintain. This is because there are

some Christian thinkers (e.g., Irenaeus) who maintain that God makes use of divine

means (i.e., the Son and the Spirit) in creating the world. So, while it is plausible that God

may create the world *ex nihilo* by use of divine means, God's use of non-divine means is

not compatible with creation *ex nihilo*. Thus, one committed to a historically informed

conception of creation *ex nihilo*, especially one that is informed by the (largely western)

sources mentioned here, has reason to hold that, if God creates *ex nihilo*, then the means

by which God creates cannot be something that is not divine

The Preclusion of Non-Divine Means as Necessary for Creation *Ex Nihilo*

There is further reason to preclude non-divine means from a historically informed

account of creation *ex nihilo.* If it were the case that God could make use of non-divine

means in creation *ex nihilo*, then it seems that the only two conditions that would be

necessary for creation *ex nihilo* would be (1) that the world that God created did not

previously exist, and (2) that God created the world, constituent parts and all.[37] I suggest

that, in light of the sources examined here, a third condition is necessary: (3) God does

not create the world through any non-divine means. However, perhaps I've made my case

too hastily. Is it possible that one might reject (3) in favor of a more modest proposal?

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36. Note that my positing that the Christian tradition precludes God's use of non-divine means is a much more modest assertion than stating that the Christian tradition precludes God's use of non-divine grounds. It is much easier to show the presence of the former than the latter within the Christian tradition. In fact, if my assertion were that God's creation of the world precludes non-divine grounds, then the exegetical burden of proof would be greater. It seems that all of the witnesses here are, at the very least, stating that God does not actively employ something that is not-God in his creation of the world. This then makes my overall task of showing that, for God, all grounds must be means, a primarily philosophical, rather than exegetical, task.

37. Both of these mentioned conditions are at least necessary because things are created which previously didn't exist all the time (e.g., houses, babies, and works of art). But these hardly seem to amount to bona fide instances of creation *ex nihilo*.

Need all non-divine means be rejected? One might reject (3) in favor of a view in which

creation *ex nihilo* merely necessitates that God does not create the world out of/through

matter. But this does not accord well with the sources surveyed here. For example, this

would entail that God could make use of non-divine immaterial means. As we have seen

from our survey of the Christian tradition, conceptions of creation *ex nihilo* have often

precluded such a possibility. For instance, the second-century Christian thinker, Tatian,

held that God created even the immaterial forms (and, thus, did not make use of them in

creation).[38] Furthermore, as was noted with Athanasius, contra the Arians who posited

that Christ (whose pre-incarnate nature is immaterial) was created by God to help create

the world, God does not stand in need of any immaterial means to create the world. In

fact, for Athanasius, if God does stand in need of some means (even immaterial and

personal ones, like the Arian conception of Christ), then this would imply that God stands

in need of an instrument in much the same way a carpenter stands in need of a saw.[39]

Additionally, as we saw with Irenaeus, God does not make use of any angels (which are

immaterial creatures) in his act of creation.[40] If creation *ex nihilo* merely precluded

material means, then God's use of immaterial means, such as the ones mentioned here,

would be compatible with creation *ex nihilo*. Given that there is a strong vein within the

Christian tradition that precludes such means from their account of creation *ex nihilo*, a

historically informed account of creation *ex nihilo* ought to also preclude such means.

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38. William Lane Craig, *God over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 35.

39. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.7.26 (*NPNF*[2] 4), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/28161.htm.

40. Edwards, *Christian Understandings of Creation,* 30.

Thus, what constitutes a thing (be it material or immaterial) is not ultimately what is problematic about God's use of means.

Additionally, one might be tempted to hold, as an alternative to (3), that creation *ex nihilo* must preclude God's use of external means. But this is not without its problematic implications for creation *ex nihilo*. For example, by merely precluding external means, one fails to include legitimately problematic *internal* means. If divine ideas are real and distinct from God, then, to reiterate Levering's point, God's act of creation is reduced to simply copying a pre-existing divine template.[41] This would seem to diminish God's creative capacities in much the same way God's simply molding primordial matter would reduce God's creative capacities. Because divine ideas are held to exist *within* the mind of God, such a conception of divine ideas seems to show that there are plausible instances of God's making use of internal means in creating the world. Thus, merely precluding God's use of external means is not sufficient to avoid a problematic conception of creation *ex nihilo*. The proximity of a certain means in relation to God is, therefore, not ultimately what is problematic about God's use of means for an account of creation *ex nihilo.*

Moreover, if one rejected (3) in favor of a view that merely precludes God's use of contingent means in creation *ex nihilo*, this would not go far enough. One can think of means that God might make use of that are not contingent that would be problematic for an account of creation *ex nihilo*. If, for example, abstract objects are real and distinct from God, then they would be necessarily existent.[42] And if God's creative actions must

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41. Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation*, 53–4.

42. Unless one is an absolute creationist, but this poses its own problems. See, Craig, *God over All*, 43.

depend on such abstract objects, then this would seem to diminish creation *ex nihilo* in much the same way that God's use of matter or divine ideas would. Thus, the problematic nature of non-divine means cannot be explained by the contingency of the means employed by God.

My assertion is that the problematic nature of non-divine means stems from the fact that they are non-divine. What such a non-divine means would be made up of, its "location" external/internal to God, or its modal status is irrelevant to creation *ex nihilo* if it either (a) is not a means for God's creation or (b) is itself divine.[43] Thus, it seems plausible to hold that what is problematic about non-divine means for creation *ex nihilo* is that they ground God's creative action and, more obviously, they lack divinity.[44] What makes means problematic, then, is not *what* they are per se, but what they are *not*: God. Therefore, a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo* ought in principle to preclude God's use of any non-divine means in his act of creation.

For God's Act of Creation, All Grounds are Means

The second reason we have for holding to premise 1 of the primary argument of this thesis is that if God's creative action must be grounded/derived from something that is not-God, then the means by which God creates must be something that is not divine. In order to illustrate this point, it is necessary to unpack in more detail the notion of grounds. Loosely, a "ground" is something that metaphysically determines/entails or

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43. One could reject the existence of such entities due to other traditional divine attributes (e.g., aseity), but such entities, if they are causally irrelevant to God's creative action, are not problematic for one's conception of creation *ex nihilo*.

44. If they didn't ground God's creative act, they would be irrelevant to his act of creation.

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makes true something else.[45] As Fine explains, the notion of grounds stems from the idea that some propositions/truths/events hold "in virtue of" others.[46] Additionally, there is a distinction between a full and partial ground.[47] A full ground is a ground that is sufficient to entail some fact/event, while a partial ground is one that is, in and of itself, insufficient but still contributory to the truth of a given fact/event.[48] To repeat a previously used example, imagine cutting a cantaloupe with a kitchen knife. The kitchen knife will serve as a partial ground for one's cutting of the cantaloupe.[49] While grounds often entail counterfactual dependence, this need not be the case.[50] Even if one might have been able to cut the cantaloupe without this *particular* kitchen knife (e.g., just any other kitchen knife would do the job), this specific instance of cutting the cantaloupe is still grounded in this *particular* kitchen knife. Broadly, then, grounds are what, at least in part, explain why/how it is that something else holds.

What, then, is the relation between a ground and what I have called a means? First, it must be pointed out that all means must be (at least partial) grounds for the agents employing them. Allow me to illustrate with a comedic example: Imagine with me a wizard, we'll name him Dübendorf, who can allegedly create a toad *ex nihilo*. Now, if

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45. Ricki Bliss and Kelly Trogdon, "Metaphysical Grounding," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2016, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/grounding/.

46. Kit Fine, "A Guide to Ground," in *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, ed. Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37.

47. Alastair Wilson, "Metaphysical Causation," *Nous* 52.4 (2018): 726.

48. Ibid., 726.

49. Grounds need not necessarily be thought of as being related, strictly, to things such as facts/events; I am only employing this language here as an example. Grounds can refer to any thing that entails some thing else or any thing that holds in virtue of something else.

50. Sungho Choi explains: "[an] event *c* counterfactually depends on the event *e* if, without *c*, *e* would not have occurred." See "Causation and Counterfactual Dependence," *Erkenntnis* 67 (2007): 1.

when we observe Dübendorf performing the alleged act of creation *ex nihilo*, we notice him waving a wand and a toad—atoms, webbed feet, and all—subsequently coming into being we might be tempted to think this a bona fide instance of creation *ex nihilo*. But, not so fast! It is clear from the illustration that Dübendorf must make use of some intermediary or means which is distinct from himself in order to create the toad (i.e., the wand)! But Dübendorf's wand must, in some sense and to some extent, ground his creative action. That is, Dübendorf's wand is, in part, what explains *how* the toad comes into being. This will be true of any intermediary/means. This is because, if a means were totally causally irrelevant to an agent's action, then the agent could not, in any sense, be understood to employ such a means. It could not constitute a means in any sense. If Dübendorf does not, in any way, *use* his wand, then his wand cannot be a means of his action. The same is true with any action. If a would-be means in no way grounds the action of a given agent, then it is unclear how this could be conceived of as a means. Thus, all means must be grounds for the agents employing them.

But, notice that the title of this section states that, at least in reference to God, all grounds are means. But do we have reason to think that the relationship between grounds and means is a symmetrical one? Just because all means are grounds does not necessarily entail that all grounds are means. In fact, we have prima facie evidence indicating the opposite! First, remember the illustration of the distinction between the rain as grounds and the bat hitting the ball as a means. Grounds need not be active, whereas means (as I have used the term) must necessarily be employed actively. Allow me to use an additional illustration. Imagine that as his day job Dübendorf works at a major law firm. When Dübendorf arrives at his office he receives word that he has gotten a promotion on

account of his consistently arriving to work on time. Now, consider the fact that Dübendorf's office lies on the fiftieth floor of the building and he must regularly take an elevator to his office. Now, if the elevator would have been faulty on the morning of Dübendorf's promotion, he would have been late and the promotion may very well have been revoked. Thus, the elevator's functioning properly is a partial ground for Dübendorf's receiving his promotion. But, the elevator seems to hardly constitute a means that Dübendorf uses to receive his promotion. Sure, Dübendorf might have some control over which buttons he might press on the elevator, for example, but he has no control over the elevator's overall functioning. While Dübendorf's use of the wand in the prior example is a clear instance of using a means, Dübendorf's use of the elevator is not. The elevator's proper functioning is not, in any meaningful way, in Dübendorf's control. Dübendorf's use of the wand is active, whereas the elevator's being a partial ground for his promotion is passive. We have reason to hold that not all grounds are means.[51] Thus, there is reason to be skeptical of my assertion that if God's creative action is grounded in something that is not-God, then God must employ a non-divine means.

While it is true that the vast majority of human experience would indicate that not all grounds are means, I would like to suggest that for God, all grounds related to God's creation of the world *must* be means. There are three reasons for thinking this. First, if God is omniscient, then God is aware of every facet of what happens when he is creating the world. Thus, God must not be ignorant of the grounds that ground his creative actions. Second, if God is sovereign, then God is in control of whatever grounds

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51. I have no interest here in holding that all grounds are means in general. If, however, all grounds are means, then my argument would be strengthened.

ultimately give rise to the world. Third, in light of divine freedom, God is not compelled to create the world. Creation *ex nihilo* is partly predicated on the rejection of the emanationist or fatalist conceptions of the world.[52] God's act of creation is an utterly free and sovereign act. Thus, in light of the fact that God is aware of all of the grounds that are individually necessary and collectively sufficient to bring about the cosmos that he wishes to create prior to his act of creation (logically speaking), and given that God is not compelled to create the cosmos, God must actively employ all of the grounds necessary to create the cosmos. God, out of his utter freedom and sovereignty, must actively choose to utilize the grounds necessary to create the world. This would entail that all of the things that ground God's creative action must be actively employed by God. But this, precisely, is the definition of means I sketched out earlier. Thus, at least for God's creative act, anything that grounds God's creative action must be a means used by God. God's creative capacity in no way passively depends on some more fundamental principle. Rather, in light of divine omniscience, sovereignty, and freedom, God is aware of and in absolute control of the grounds necessary to create the world and must volitionally employ them to bring the world about. Whatever grounds are necessary to bring about the world, then, must be actively employed by God as means.

But, if God's creative action must be grounded in something that is not-God, and if—as I have argued here—all grounds of God's creative action must be employed as means by God, then God must make use of (at least some) non-divine means to create the world. But this, coupled with our rationale from earlier that God must not make use of non-divine means to create the world *ex nihilo*, entails the truth of the first premise of my

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52. Highfield, *The Faithful Creator*, 134.

overall argument: If God's creative action is derived from something that is not-God, then God cannot create *ex nihilo*. In light of this, we have good reason for accepting premise 1. Thus, God must be the sole ground of the world.

Supplemental Reasons for Holding God as the Sole Ground of the World's Creation

As noted in the introduction, there are supplemental reasons for holding that God as the sole ground of the world's creation is a necessary condition for creation *ex nihilo*. Any conception of creation *ex nihilo* that entails that God is not the sole ground of the world will not be compatible with divine sovereignty and aseity. The doctrine of divine aseity holds that God exists independently of everything else.[53] Additionally, the doctrine of divine aseity traditionally holds that God is the only being that exists *a se*.[54] But if, contrary to premise 1, God's creative actions must be derived from something that is not-God, then God would not exclusively exist *a se*. This is because, if when God creates the cosmos, God's creative act would be derived from something that is not-God, then this would seem to imply that *that* something, that is not itself God, existed *a se*.

Furthermore, if God is not the sole ground of the world's creation, then God would not be sovereign over the world. Divine sovereignty has often been couched in terms of all things being such as they are because God has willed them to be such as they are.[55] But if something that God did not create partially grounds the creation of the world,

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53. Craig, *God over All*, 1.

54. Ibid., 1.

55. I have purposefully defined "sovereignty" broadly here. I do not need the hyper-monergist/compatibilist view to be true for my critique to hold. It is perfectly compatible with softer views of sovereignty (e.g., molinism). See, Vincent Bacote, "John Calvin on Sovereignty," in *The Sovereignty of God Debate*, ed. D. Stephen Long and George Kalantzis (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 62; William E. Mann, "Divine Sovereignty and Aseity," in *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 35-58; Kenneth L. Pearce, "Counterpossible Dependence and the Efficacy of the Divine Will," *Faith and Philosophy* vol. 34 (2017): 3-16.

then there is something that is prior (at least logically) to the divine will. In such a case the world's coming into being would not be due exclusively to the sovereign will of God but, rather, would presuppose something that is not itself God. God's will would not be intrinsically efficacious or sovereign but would presuppose something that is not divine and extrinsic to the divine will. Attempts to salvage divine sovereignty by noting how even such non-divine grounds are themselves under the sovereignty of God would not undermine my claim pertaining to sovereignty. This is because all that is required for divine sovereignty to be undermined (and all my argument as a whole implies) is that something that is not-God and is *itself* not created by/dependent upon God grounds God's creative will. Since, then, as has already been stated, I have no interest within this paper to offer a conception of creation *ex nihilo* that is at odds with traditional divine attributes, any conception of God's creation of the world in which God's creative actions must be grounded in something that is not-God ought to be rejected.

Concluding Remarks

Within this chapter I have argued that if God's creative action must in any way be grounded in something that is not-God, then God cannot create *ex nihilo*. This follows from two reasons: First, a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo* entails that if God creates *ex nihilo*, then the means by which God creates must be divine. There is a strong cumulative case from the Christian tradition that would bolster this view. Second, if God's creative act is grounded (even partially) in something that is not-God, then God must use some non-divine means to create the world. This is because, while the relationship between what I have dubbed "means" and grounds usually need not be symmetrical, for at least God's creative act, however, all grounds must be means. This

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follows from a robust view of divine omniscience, sovereignty, and freedom. Additionally, there are supplemental considerations that would also lend support to the plausibility of premise 1. Namely, if God's creative action must be derived from something that is not-God, then this would risk undermining divine sovereignty and aseity. These reasons, while independently compelling, when taken together give us a strong cumulative case for the plausibility of premise 1.

What follows then is that God is the very means by which he creates.[56] Or, as Highfield puts it, "God is his own 'how.'"[57] This argument implies that, since for God's creative act all grounds must be means and since God cannot make use of non-divine means in creating the world, God must be the sole ground of the world's creation. God, and God alone, is what brings about the world. This spells trouble for any realist position of properties, essences, abstract objects, etc., that would entail that God's creative action would be grounded in such things. If such things exist as entities really distinct from God prior to God's act of creation, then God is necessarily bound to derive his creative capacities from them. Thus, any realist view of properties, essences, or abstract objects that holds that such things really exist prior to creation entails that God *must* derive God's creative capacities from such entities. But from what has been argued here, we have reason to hold that God's creative act can in no way be grounded in anything that is not-God. Thus, we ought to reject realist positions on things like properties, essences, and

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56. Implicit within this conclusion is the assumption that God is, at the very least, something like an agent. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer any exhaustive account of divine agency, since my primary concern here is exploring what grounds the creation event and God's creative capacities. Regardless of whatever implications DDS bears on a theory of divine agency, it seems that if, at worst, God is not an agent, this would only be because concepts of agency would imply an imperfection in God and could by no means diminish the divine nature.

57. Highfield, *The Faithful Creator*, 82, n. 15.

abstract objects because they would undermine creation *ex nihilo*. God alone is the

ground for the creation of the world. This seems to be an important aspect of what the

doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is seeking to preserve. No primordial muck, nor angel, nor

abstract object grounds (even in a partial way) the world's coming into being. Rather,

creation *ex nihilo* necessitates a cosmogony with God alone at its source.

CHAPTER III

A GOD COMPOSED OF PARTS CANNOT CREATE *EX NIHILO*

Introduction

Within the previous chapter, I argued that a necessary condition for affirming creation *ex nihilo* is that God cannot derive his action from something that is not-God. Within this chapter, I will argue that a God composed of parts must derive its creative actions from something that is not-God. In order to demonstrate this, I will address three issues. First, I will define *precisely* what is meant by the word "part." Second, I will argue that, in an analogous way to how parts are often argued to be prior to wholes in *existence*, at least some parts must be prior to wholes in *action*. In other words, in order for composite beings to act, their actions must depend on (at least one of) their parts. Third, I will argue that if God is composed of parts, and if what I've argued about actions depending on parts is true, then a God composed of parts must derive its creative actions from something that is not God. From this, it follows that a God composed of parts cannot create *ex nihilo*. Furthermore, if this is the case, then the overall argument of the thesis follows: In order for God to be capable of creating *ex nihilo*, God must be simple (i.e., non-composite). I will then close this chapter with some concluding remarks.

The Nature of Parts

Premise 2 within the overall argument states that if God has proper parts, then something that is not God, *at least* one of God's proper parts, is a necessary condition for God to act. It is necessary to unpack precisely what is meant by this premise. If God is

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composite in a real sense, then God has proper parts. It is important for the purposes of this thesis to have a working definition of "part" and "proper part" respectively. First, "informally … object X is a part of object Y if and only if X is a component of Y, or X is contained in Y, or Y presupposes X, or X is one of the objects that Y is composed of."[1] Secondly, in contrast, "object X is a *proper* part of an object Y if and only if X is a part of Y and Y is not a part of X" (*emphasis mine*).[2] In other words, a part need not be distinct from a whole, whereas something is a proper part if it is an aspect of a thing without being identical to that thing.[3] Thus, if God is really composite (that is, not merely conceptually composite), then God is composed of actually distinct proper parts.

Within classical doctrines of God, parts within the divine life would be constituted by anything that implies composition. For example, for Thomas Aquinas, a composition of act/potency or essence/existence would constitute composition within the divine life. Since, within this thesis, I am not committed to pushing any particular Aristotelian or Neoplatonic metaphysic, I will abstain, for the moment, from committing to the idea that a distinction of act/potency or essence/existence (and the like) constitute real parts. Rather, if my argument within this chapter succeeds, then it will follow that *if* essence/existence or act/potency (or any other thing within the divine life) entails that God is composed of parts, then that would entail that God would be incapable of creating *ex nihilo*. Thus, premise 2 within the argument holds that if God is composed of *any* real proper parts, then God's creative action must be derived from something that is not-God.

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1. Roy T. Cook, "Parthood." *Dictionary of Philosophical Logic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 216.

2. Ibid., "Proper Parthood," 231.

3. I will be utilizing the terms "part" and "proper part" interchangeably.

The Priority of Parts to Wholes in Existence and Action

The question arises, then, even if God has proper parts, why should we think that one of those parts is necessary for God to perform creative actions? It is at this point in the argument that Plotinus's conception of composition and contingency is useful. For Plotinus, anything that is composed must be contingent upon its parts. In describing the One, Plotinus notes, "Untouched by multiplicity, it will be wholly self-sufficing, an absolute First, whereas any not-first demands its earlier, and any non-simplex needs the simplicities within itself as the very foundations of its composite existence."[4] For Plotinus, a composite is posterior (at least logically) to its parts. In offering an illustration of the contingency of wholes upon their parts, Feser writes, "For the whole cannot exist unless the parts exist and are combined in the right way. For example, if there were no chair legs, no frame, or no seat, the chair would not exist."[5] Feser goes on to note that this contingency is not simply the byproduct of being contingent upon chronologically prior events, "[even] if a certain chair had always existed, it would still be true that its existence presupposes that its parts exist and are put together in the right way."[6] A composite presupposes the existence of its parts. As Gavrilyuk notes in describing Plotinus's notion of composition implying contingency, "Non-simple things are composed, and composed things ontologically depend on their parts in the sense that if a

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4. *Enn*. 5.4.1.

5. Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 69.

6. Ibid., 74.

part is removed, the thing is no longer what it used to be."[7] The existence of a composite thing, then, is wrapped up in the existence of its respective parts.

Since, however, my argument is not aimed at demonstrating that a composite God's *existence* must be derived from its parts, but rather, that a composite God's creative *actions* must be derived from its parts, we must now apply Plotinus's thoughts on parts to God's creative action. If a being is composed of parts, then for that being to act it will need to make use of (at least) one of its parts. Thus, its ability to act is derived from at least one of its proper parts. For instance, Dübendorf is undoubtedly composed of body parts. If Dübendorf decides to go for a jog one morning, then his action must necessarily presuppose at least one (probably more) of his parts. Dübendorf will not be able to jog if he does not have a heart, for example. Thus, at least one of Dübendorf's parts is necessary for him to act. Dübendorf's ability to run, then, is dependent upon the existence and functionality of his heart. In other words, Dübendorf's capacity to run is *grounded* in (at least) one of his parts. This does not entail that Dübendorf necessarily needs *all* of his parts to act (after all, he could run even if he tragically lost his hand while practicing magic). However, there is at least one of Dübendorf's parts that is necessary for him to act. One of Dübendorf's parts must *ground* his capacity to act. This is because it would be inexplicable that any being composed of parts could act wholly independently of its parts.

The same can be said of God. If God is composed of proper parts, then the fact that God is capable of creating the world is true *in virtue of* (at least) one of his parts. In

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7. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "Plotinus on Divine Simplicity" (lecture presented at the Divine Simplicity Conference, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, 19 March 2015), 4, https://www.academia.edu/10063215/ Plotinus_on_Divine_Simplicity_paper_presented_at_the_Divine_Simplicity_Conference_Wheaton_Colleg e_Wheaton_IL_March_19_2015.

other words, at least one of God's parts is what (in part) explains *why* God has the capacity to create the world. But this is, precisely, what the grounding relation is! Even if it is the case that God doesn't use *all* of God's parts to create the world, God *must* make use of at least one of God's parts to create the world. Since a composite cannot act *wholly independently* of its parts, there must be some part of God that serves (at least partially) as a ground for God's creative act. This is because *without* said part (or parts) God would be unable to perform the act in question (i.e., creating the world) *or* would simply cease to exist because the absence of that part would preclude the possibility of God's existence. In either case, God's ability to perform an action would be derived from God's parts. It seems that to avoid stating that God's creative actions are in some way derived from (at least) one of God's parts, one must either say that God is simple or that God, as a composite, can act wholly independently of God's parts. But since the latter is incoherent, the only possible alternative to denying that God's creative action is derived from (at least) one of God's parts is to say that God is simple.[8]

But, perhaps I've made a category error. Sure, the language of grounds is helpful when we speak of counterfactuals. After all, it really is true Dübendorf's capacity to go jogging is grounded in some of his parts (e.g., his heart) *because* without such parts Dübendorf would not be able to perform the action in question (i.e., go for a jog). But God is traditionally understood to be a necessarily existent being. By extension, then, *if* God is composed of proper parts, then God's parts would each be necessarily existent. But if this is the case does the language of grounds become useless? We cannot speak of

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8. Of course, one could maintain that God's creative action might be grounded in one (or more) of God's parts; but, as will be seen, we have reason for rejecting such a position.

counterfactuals in reference to God's necessarily existent parts. Sure, if God did lack a

given part, then God would not be able to create *ex nihilo*. But if God exists necessarily,

then the antecedent of the aforementioned statement is necessarily impossible. We cannot

even speak of a possible "world" in which God lacks a given part.[9] However, we *can*

speak of explanations of certain things even when such things are necessarily the case.[10]

As Leftow notes, "There may be a reason why P even if there are no alternatives to its

being the case that P."[11] Or, as Leftow also states, "One can say why P rather than Q

partly by saying *why* it is impossible that Q" (emphasis original).[12] Thus, for Leftow, it is

possible that one might explain necessary things.

Leftow goes on to list several cases in which necessary facts can depend on

others. Dependence need not necessitate causation. As we've already seen in Plotinus,

many hold that composites presuppose the existence of their constitutive parts.[13] Leftow

uses the example of a wall composed of red bricks to illustrate that the redness of the

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9. It is worth noting that there is some dispute within the literature as to whether we can meaningfully speak of impossible worlds. Davidson notes, contra Lewis's thoughts on possible world semantics, that there are examples of counterfactuals of impossible states of affairs that are not merely trivially true. Davidson offers the following statement, "If an omniscient being knew no mathematics, he would fail calculus," to show that there are at least some plausible statements about impossible worlds that may be true in a nontrivial fashion. Furthermore, not all counterfactuals in impossible circumstances would be trivially true; for example, the statement "If an omniscient being knew no mathematics, he'd do well in calculus" seems to be false. Thus it seems possible that we can speak of counterpossibles in a way that is not trivially true.

Vander Laan, among others, have proposed that language of "impossible worlds" helps make sense of counterpossible statements. See, Matthew Davidson, "God and Other Necessary Beings," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2015, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/god-necessary-being/.

10. Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 504.

11. Ibid., 504.

12. Ibid., 504.

13. Ibid., 505.

bricks does not necessarily cause the wall to be red but nevertheless *explains* the redness

of the wall.[14] Leftow states, "Even if both wall and parts existed necessarily, the parts'

redness would explain the whole's, and the whole's would depend on its parts', not *vice*

versa" (emphasis original).[15] Leftow also points to things such as sets to illustrate how

necessary truths can depend on others. While 2+2=4 is necessarily true, Leftow notes, the

truth of 2+2=4 still presupposes the truth of its constituent members.[16] In other words,

even necessarily existent sets must presuppose the reality of their constituent particulars.

We can think of other plausible instances of real dependence among modally necessary

things. Imagine, for instance, a book sitting atop a coffee table.[17] Even if, for whatever

reason, the book and the coffee table necessarily existed, surely it is still the case that the

book really *depends* on the coffee table to remain aloft in every possible world. Thus, the

language of dependence seems to be a broader category than mere counterfactual

dependence. For Leftow, the language of dependence is to be understood as "being-

from."[18] This would help solve difficulties of causation when counterfactual dependence

does not seem to do the trick.

  A popular criticism of David Lewis's language of causation as counterfactual

dependence often involves pointing out that there are plausible counterexamples of

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14. Leftow, *God and Necessity,* 505.

15. Ibid., 505.

16. Ibid., 505.

17. This illustration of dependence is loosely inspired by C.S. Lewis's comments on begetting within his *Mere Christianity* and Edward Feser's illustration of act/potency. See, C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: A Revised and Amplified Edition* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980), 173-4; Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 17ff.

18. Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 508.

causation that *do not* involve counterfactual dependence. For example, "Suppose that along with Billy, Suzy threw her rock at the window at almost the same time. Then the counterfactual 'If Billy had not thrown his rock, the window would not have shattered' is false."[19] But if, as Leftow contends, "being-from" is an ontological category that would contain all instances of causation while also being a broader category than causation, this would explain how Billy could be understood to be a genuine cause of the window's shattering even when the event does not counterfactually depend on his action. In other words, while the window's shattering would not counterfactually depend on Billy's throwing the rock, the action itself would *be from* Billy's throwing of the rock.[20] Hence, the lack of counterfactual dependence need not necessitate the lack of *any* real dependence. Thus, it would seem that *even* among necessary things, there can be dependence. Hence, the objection against my argument here that the language of grounding makes no sense when speaking of necessary existing entities (e.g., God's parts) does not succeed given that real dependence does not require *modal* dependence.

It follows, then, that *if* God is composed of parts, then God's creative actions must be derived from (at least one of) God's parts. This is true even *if* God's parts are necessarily existent because, as we have seen, there can be real dependence among necessarily existent entities. In a similar manner to how a necessarily existing book must really depend on a necessarily existing coffee table to be held aloft, so too would God's creative capacity really depend on at least one (if not more) of God's parts. Thus, if God

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19. Sara Bernstein, "Lewis's Theories of Causation and Their Influence," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945–2015*, ed. Kelly Becker and Iain D. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming).

20. I take Leftow's language of "being from" to be synonymous with how I have employed the term "ground."

is composed of parts, then there is real dependence of God's creative action upon (at least) one of God's parts (even if both God and God's parts are necessarily existent). The only way to avoid such a conclusion would be to posit that God is simple.

But, what is the problem with avoiding simplicity by positing that God's creative actions are derived from one of God's necessarily existing parts? What is ultimately lost under such a view? Well, as premise 2 in the main argument states, a God composed of parts must derive its creative action from something that is not-God. This can be shown via identity *or* predication. First, if God is composed of parts, then God is distinct from any one of God's parts. But, Leibniz's law concerning the identity of indiscernibles states, "if x and y are distinct then there is at least one property that x has and y does not, or vice versa."[21] If God has parts, however, then God must not be identical to any one of his parts (i.e., they must not share every property). If God were identical with any one of God's parts, then such a part (or parts) wouldn't actually be a proper part at all. Thus, if God's creative action is derived from a part of God, then such action would be derived from something that is not-God, at least in terms of identity. This is because God and the part that God derives God's creative action from are distinct, and thus God would derive God's creative action from something distinct from God.

Even if identity would be too strong of an "is" to employ here, the same is true in terms of predication. To predicate of a thing that "X is God," X would need to exemplify or instantiate the essential properties of God.[22] Or, as Thomas Senor puts it, if we take

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21. Peter Forrest, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 31 July 1996, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-indiscernible/.

22. See Kevin Mulligan, "Predication," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 7: 665-6.

divinity to be a "kind" of which things can instantiate, then it must (at least) be "a collection of properties that are essential for anything to count as divine."[23] But if God's creative action is (even partially) grounded in one of God's parts, then God's creative action would be derived from something that does not exemplify what it means to be God. This is because each of God's parts do not, in and of themselves, exemplify what it means to be God (i.e., they do not possess all of the essential attributes of divinity). God's power, for instance, does not possess all of the essential properties of divinity (omniscience or omnibenevolence, for example). In other words, it would be wrong to predicate of God's power that "God's power is God." Thus, if God's power is *really* distinct from God, then God's creative action would be grounded in something that is not-God. God's power is not-God in terms of identity *and* predication. The same applies to *any* proper part of God.

Allow me to make use of another example. If God's creative power is derived from God's parts A, B, and C, then *each* of the parts (taken individually) ground (at least partially) God's creative power. That is, any one of the parts contributes, in an incomplete way, to God's having the capacity to create. But part A does not exemplify what it means to be God. Thus, God's creative action would be derived from something that is not-God.

Since, then, a composite God's creative action must be grounded in something that is not-God (either in terms of identity or predication), and creation *ex nihilo* necessitates that, if God creates *ex nihilo*, then God does not derive its action from something that is not-God, it follows that a God composed of parts cannot create *ex*

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23. Thomas D. Senor, "God Supernatural Kinds, and the Incarnation," *RelS* 27.3 (1991): 355.

nihilo. Therefore, if one seeks to maintain a traditional conception of creation *ex nihilo*, then they have good reason to reject the view that God is composed of parts.

Objections

Before exploring any additional implications of what has been argued for here, it is necessary to address some lingering questions and objections. First, premise 2 of the argument offered within this thesis states that a God composed of parts must derive its creative action from something that is not-God. But could this be avoided by postulating that a composite God's creative action might be grounded in *all* of its parts? If this were the case, since the sum of God's parts is God himself, then God's creative action would be derived from God. However, this objection misunderstands one of the primary points emphasized in the argument. Even if God made use of *all* of God's parts to create the world, it would still be true that God must derive God's creative action from *each* of the parts. So, even if God is, say, composed of parts A, B, C, and D, and God uses A, B, C, and D to create, God's creative action would be derived from each part, A, B, C, and D, individually. Even if, for example, God's creative capacities are not *counterfactually* dependent upon A, B, C, and D, if God *does* make use of A, B, C, and D, to create the world, then God's creation of the world would be grounded in each part. Each part, in part, helps explain God's creation of the world. To harken back to an example from the last chapter: if I do not need a particular kitchen knife to cut a cantaloupe, if just any kitchen knife would do, and I still use a given kitchen knife, then *that* kitchen knife still grounds this particular instance of my cutting of the cantaloupe. Thus, if God uses all of God's parts to create the world, then each of God's parts, taken individually, partially grounds God's creation of the world. And given that none of God's parts, individually,

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exemplify the essence of divinity, then God's creative action would still be derived from something that is not-God. In fact, the problem would only be multiplied by such an alternative. If God makes use of parts A, B, C, and D to create the world instead of just part A, for example, then, since none of the parts themselves exemplify divinity, God's creative action would be grounded in four non-divine entities instead of one! This is not to deny that God would still create the world, but, rather, that God's creation of the world would be grounded in something that is not-God. To use another illustration: suppose that I lift a box by using muscles in my legs and (unadvisedly) in my back. Additionally, suppose that I am strong enough to lift the box by using my legs. The use of my back muscles would be unnecessary to lift the box, but my back muscles would still, nevertheless, partially ground my lifting of the box. But my back muscles are not me. Back muscles do not possess all of the essential characteristics that *I* do. Hence, my lifting of the box would be (partially) derived from something that is *really* not-me. It would still be true that I lifted the box, but it would not be true that I lifted the box in an underived manner. While my lifting of the box was not counterfactually dependent upon my back muscles, my back muscles would still partially ground my action. The same is true of God. This is because it would still be true that, even if God made use of all of God's parts to create the world, any one of God's parts, which are not themselves God, would still ground God's creative action. Thus, just positing that God makes use of *all* of God's parts to create the world does not negate the fact that God's creative action would be grounded in something that is not-God.

But what if we could posit that the parts that ground God's creative action *do* exemplify divinity? The Christian tradition offers a potential solution with universal

appeal: the Trinity. Could it be the case that the Triune persons of God, which themselves might be conceived of as proper parts of God, ground God's creative activity? If this is the case, then premise 2 would be false. We would have a conceivable instance in which a composite God's creative actions would *not* be derived from something that is not-God. God's creative actions would be derived from God and God alone! Unfortunately, there are a handful of problems with this objection.

First, and perhaps, most importantly, the persons of the Trinity were not historically understood to be proper parts of God. As Ayres notes, the pro-Nicene Christians themselves were committed to the notion that God is wholly non-composite and without parts.[24] In fact, Ayres states that one of the major dilemmas of Nicaea was maintaining an irreducible threeness of the Triune persons while not violating divine simplicity.[25] Thus, given that a historically informed conception of the Trinity does not conceive of the Triune persons as proper parts of God, those interested in maintaining a Trinitarian theology in line with a Nicene trajectory would have reason not to posit that the Triune persons are proper parts of God.

Second, even without such historical considerations, a conception of the Triune persons as proper parts of God suffers from plenty of problems on its own. For example, ought we to consider the property of "being triune" to be an essential attribute of

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24. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 281. This is not, of course, to say that all of the pro-Nicene Christians agreed about all that a denial of parts in God implied about God and God's attributes. Nevertheless, Ayres notes, such a commitment to simplicity clearly shaped the theology of Pro-Nicene Christians.

25. Ibid., 281.

divinity?[26] Or, as Leftow puts it, is the Trinity an additional "case" of divinity?"[27] If being Triune is an essential attribute of divinity, and if the Triune persons are proper parts of God, then neither the Father, the Son, nor the Holy Spirit ought to be considered God, because they do not possess this essential attribute. God the Father, for example, is not Triune, but rather, a person *of* the Trinity. Thus, if being Triune is an essential attribute of God and the Triune persons are proper parts of God, then one must deny the divinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If, on the other hand, being Triune is not an essential attribute of divinity, then God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit would all exemplify divinity but would, in and of themselves, possess all of the essential attributes of divinity. If the Triune persons are really distinct, and being Triune is not an essential attribute of divinity, then there would be three instances of divinity. But this then would lead to tritheism! Thus, a conception of the Triune persons as proper parts of God seems to face the inevitable pitfalls of either tritheism or denying the divinity of the Triune persons. Both options are unacceptable for one informed by a historical conception of the Triune persons.

Third, even if the Triune persons (as proper parts of God) can ground God's creative action without falling prey to the objections listed above, there are still additional problems. If the Triune persons themselves are composed of parts, then the force of the argument laid out here remains intact. The only way to escape such a conclusion would

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26. My comments here are inspired by Brian Leftow's objections to social trinitarianism in his "Anti Social Trinitarianism" and Dale Tuggy's critiques of Trinitarianism, broadly. See, Brian Leftow, "Anti Social Trinitarianism," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203–50; Dale Tuggy, "Steve Hays Fails to Rebut the Charge of Tritheism," *Trinities: Theories about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 25 May 2018, https://trinities.org/blog/steve-hays-fails-to-rebut-the-charge-of-tritheism/.

27. Leftow, "Anti Social Trinitarianism," 221.

be to hold that the Triune persons themselves are simple entities. What would be required by such a position would be to deny any form of composition in God other than the Trinity. But this would seem problematic given that it would likely face many of the same sorts of objections that DDS already faces (e.g., is there no real distinction between God's *other* attributes?). While I find the first two objections against attempts to ground God's creative action in the Triune persons to be forceful, even if one evades those and maintains that the Trinitarian persons are themselves simple entities, this is not without its problems. Thus, attempts to ground God's creative act in the Triune persons as proper parts are not fruitful.

Alternatively, but in a similar and more narrow vein as the attempt to ground God's creative action in the Triune persons, what if God's creative action was grounded in exactly one essential part? While this might sound odd, consider the following counterfactuals. In possible world 1, God makes use of one of God's essential parts to create the world *and* a plurality of God's accidental parts. By the logic of the argument of this chapter, such a God would not be capable of creating *ex nihilo*. This would be because God's accidental parts, taken individually, are not-God by identity *or* predication. But now imagine possible world 2, in which the creative action of the same God from possible world 1 is now grounded only in God's one essential part. Are we supposed to believe that simply because God would make use of some accidental parts in possible world 1 but has the same capacities as God in possible world 2 that he does not create *ex nihilo*? There are a few responses to this question.

First, if creation *ex nihilo* does, in fact, preclude the possibility of God deriving God's creative capacities from something that is not-God, then *if* God's creative action

were (in any way) grounded in something that is not-God, such an action would not be an act of creation *ex nihilo*. So, yes, a God that makes use of accidental parts to create the world does not create *ex nihilo*. Even if such a God has the capacity to create *ex nihilo* and chooses not to, such an act would not be an act of creation *ex nihilo* in much the same way that if God could have created *ex nihilo* but chose to make use of matter, such an act would not be an act of creation *ex nihilo*.

Second, the only way God's creative action could be grounded in exactly one essential part as possible world 2 indicates would be if God has one essential part. Since essential parts are (a) necessary to the existence of a being and may also (b) be used by a being to perform an action, then if one were to remove *any* essential part from a being— even one that is not immediately used in a given action—then that being could not perform any action. Thus, any action that a being performs must (at least) presuppose the existence of *each* of that being's essential parts. Dübendorf cannot jog without his mind, even though jogging for Dübendorf is a menial and nigh-mindless activity. Therefore, all actions *depend* on (at least) each of a being's essential parts. If God is composed of a plurality of essential parts, then God's creative action must (at least) be derived from *each* of God's essential parts. Hence, the only way God's creative action could be derived from one essential part would be if God only had one essential part. Furthermore, as was noted with the Trinitarian objection above, if one holds that God is composed of only one essential part, then this would likely fall prey to objections often levied against DDS. God's omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness all seem to be essential, and yet distinct, attributes of God. Yet if God has only one essential attribute, then these would all need to be the same. But this is one significant problem that critics of DDS have with the

doctrine. Thus, efforts to avoid DDS by positing a view that falls prey to the same objections that are levied against DDS does not seem to be a fruitful path. Worse still, one could pick *which* of the traditional divine attributes is the essential attribute of God and hold the rest to be accidental. The problem with this solution is that it would leave a great many attributes that are traditionally thought to be essential to God (e.g., omnipotence, goodness, omnibenevolence, aseity—take your pick!) as accidental. Since the only way to hold that God's creative capacities are grounded in only one of God's essential parts must necessarily lead to positing that God has only one essential part, and since this would be unacceptable to critics of DDS, such an alternative should be rejected.

Another potential objection to what has been argued for here is inspired by William Lane Craig's thoughts on the Trinity.[28] In some of his works on the Trinity, in an effort to defend his robust account of social Trinitarianism, Craig asks whether it is possible for a thing to be divine in more than one way. Craig and Moreland use the illustration of proper parts of a cat and the category of *felinity*.[29] "One way of being feline is to exemplify the nature of a cat. But there are other ways to be feline as well. A cat's DNA or skeleton is feline, even if neither is a cat. Nor is this a sort of downgraded or attenuated felinity: a cat's skeleton is fully and unambiguously feline."[30] For Craig, the felinity of the cat's spine is derived from the fact that such a thing is a proper part of the

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28. It should be noted that Craig himself doesn't levy this objection against DDS or any argument that is even remotely similar to what is offered here. This is merely a hypothetical objection of which Craig offers a similar variation in discussions of the Trinity. I am changing it slightly and applying it to my argument. See, William L. Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for A Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 590; William L. Craig, "A Formulation and Defense of the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Reasonable Faith*, https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/christian-doctrines/a-formulation-and-defense-of-the-doctrine-of-the-trinity/.

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

30. Ibid., 591.

cat.[31] Craig goes on to apply such logic to his conception of the Triune persons. But, for

our purposes, let us apply it to my argument. Sure, if something is not identical to God or

does not have all of the essential divine attributes, it is a *sort* of not-God thing. But, a la

Craig, what if we just expanded the category of divinity to refer to a part of a divine

being? And, subsequently, we might have good reason to think that a God composed of

parts is not deriving its creative action from something that is not-God *in any sense*. This

alternative is not without its own problems, however.

First, as Tuggy has pointed out, it is misleading to suggest that a feline skeleton

and a cat are both feline in the same sense.[32] It doesn't seem that we can, in good faith,

say that a proper part of God *is* divine if it doesn't have the essential attributes of divinity.

Or, as Vallicella states, since we clearly do not mean the same thing by "feline" when we

say my cat is feline and this skeleton is feline, we must be using the word "feline" in an

analogical way.[33] Thus, the skeleton's felinity is only *like* the felinity of the cat. So too

with God, any divinity of a proper part of God (God's power, for example) is not really

divine in the same sense that God is divine. Thus, it would not be the case that God and a

proper part of God are divine in the same sense but achieving such predication in

different ways. Rather, the kind of "divinity" that would be predicated of each would be

different. The divinity of a proper part of God is only like the divinity of God, and not

actually the same. But, it is the assertion of this argument, that God's creative action is

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

32. Dale Tuggy, "Trinity Monotheism Part 5: 'divine,'" *Trinities: Theories about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 12 May 2019, https://trinities.org/blog/trinity-monotheism-part-5-divine/.

33. William Vallicella, "Is the Skeleton of a Cat Feline in the Same Sense as a Cat Is Feline?" *The Maverick Philosopher*, 17 January 2013, https://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2013/01/is-the-skeleton-of-a-cat-feline-in-the-same-sense-a-feline-is.html.

not grounded in something itself that does not exemplify what it means to be God. Or as Morris notes in his work on the incarnation, any being that is divine will necessarily have the essential divine attributes (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience).[34] And if God's creative action is derived from something that does not possess such essential attributes, then God's creative action would be derived from something that is not-God. Of course, it should be noted that I am probably stretching Craig's point concerning divinity (which was made in a different context) too far. Since Craig is committed to the idea that the Triune persons do each possess the essential divine attributes, then, presumably, he would have little interest in pushing the notion that something that does not possess such attributes can be called "God."[35] Thus, an attempt to avoid my argument's conclusions by broadening our conception of divinity does not seem to be a fruitful one.

Another objection to premise 2 runs as follows: wouldn't the force of premise 2 be undermined if one held a view of divine parts called the "Doctrine of Divine Priority" (henceforth, DDP)?[36] DDP holds that, since under Aristotelian conceptions of composition parts tend towards the whole and are thus in some sense dependent upon the whole, one could avoid DDS by holding that God is composed in such a way.[37] However,

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34. Thomas V. Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology: Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1:214–5.

35. Craig clearly states, after all, that the Triune persons as proper parts of God are *not* to be understood as proper parts in the same *way* that a cat skeleton is feline (Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 591). However, I think that it is possible that there is more work to be done here. It would be ideal to formulate a more precise objection to my argument here on the grounds that divinity need not include all essential divine attributes. If such an objection can avoid plain dubiousness, it would be very interesting to engage.

36. Gregory Fowler, "Simplicity or Priority?" in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6:115.

37. Ibid., 115.

as Cohoe has pointed out, "even Aristotle, who thinks that unified wholes are, in the most important sense, ontologically prior to their parts, also holds that there is another respect in which they are ontologically posterior to and dependent on these parts."[38] The important thing to note is that DDP fails to show that wholes are not dependent upon their parts in *some way*.[39] Furthermore, even if DDP were not problematic for the reasons mentioned above, it would still not resolve the problem that a composite God could not act without at least one of its parts. Even if a composite God's parts *existence* depended upon the whole, it would be inexplicable to hold that the composite God could act apart from *all* of its parts. Thus, at least one part would be a necessary condition for God to act, leaving premise 2 untarnished.

One final objection to premise 2 comes from a recent move by William Lane Craig to reject *all* constitutive ontologies. Thus, rather than accept that just one reality is simple, Craig holds that the talk of parts is not helpful in our ontology and thus rejects all talk of parts.[40] The implication of this is that all realities must be understood as simple. The problem with this move is that it is counter-intuitive and contrary to the prima facie appearance of parts in everyday human experience.[41] While the *manner in which* things may be constituted by parts may be unclear, the idea that *no* things are composed of parts is too counterintuitive to accept.

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38. Caleb M. Cohoe, "Why the One Cannot Have Parts: Plotinus on Divine Simplicity, Ontological Independence, and Perfect Being Theology," *Philosophical Quarterly* 67.269 (2017): 762.

39. Ibid., 763.

40. J. Brian Huffling, "A Response to William Lane Craig's Symposium Comments on Divine Simplicity," *J. Brian Huffling, Ph. D.* (blog), 17 February 2018, http://brianhuffling.com/2018/02/17/a-response-to-william-lane-craigs-symposium-comments-on-divine-simplicity/.

41. Ibid.

Concluding Remarks

From what has been argued within this chapter, it seems we have good reason to hold to the second premise in the argument. A God that is composed of parts must derive its creative action from (at least) one of its parts. But, a proper part of God is not-God in terms of identity or predication. But, as we've seen from chapter 1, a God that must derive its creative action from something that is not-God cannot create *ex nihilo*. Therefore, a God composed of parts cannot create *ex nihilo*. Assuming that God does in fact create *ex nihilo*, then the ultimate conclusion of the argument follows: God is without proper parts. Those committed to a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo*, then, ought to be committed to DDS. There is much more to be said, however, as to what all is entailed by DDS. Additionally, given that DDS is certainly not without its difficulties, it will be fruitful to address such difficulties. Thus, we must give ample space to address these remaining issues.

CHAPTER IV

THE SIMPLE GOD REIGNS: IMPLICATIONS AND OBJECTIONS

Introduction

Within this thesis I have argued that DDS is a necessary condition for affirming

creation *ex nihilo*. However, so far I have not done much in the way of addressing what

all might be entailed by DDS. Additionally, contemporary theology and philosophy is rife

with skepticism towards the doctrine. Thus, it will be useful to address some of the more

prominent objections to DDS. Within this chapter, I will begin by detailing the

metaphysical implications that follow from DDS. Second, I will address two of the more

prominent objections to DDS. Furthermore, I will offer some evidence for why a realist

metaphysical picture (similar to the sort that scholastic metaphysicians, such as Aquinas,

would have espoused) is prima facie more plausible than an extreme nominalist or

"relational" one. Third, I will show the theological import of DDS.

What is Entailed by DDS?

From what has been argued within this thesis it follows that if one is committed to

a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo*, then one ought to also be

committed to DDS. As has already been stated, DDS holds that God is not composed of

any proper parts. But what does this mean? Firstly, it precludes obvious entities that are

often cashed out in terms of parts, such as body parts. Thus, God, in the divine essence,

must not be conceived of as being composed of material bits, like body parts.[1] But what other kinds of things could be thought of as parts? What would it even mean for an immaterial entity to be composed of parts? At this juncture it is helpful to note the kinds of composition that DDS often rejects. Aquinas, along with many other classical theists, holds that Aristotelian categories such as act/potency are real forms of composition. Thus, if act/potency is a real form of composition, and if DDS is true, then God cannot be a composite of act and potency and must be purely actual. The same applies to essence/existence and all other forms of composition. If we have reason for holding that DDS is true, then we must deny that God is composed of any real form of composition. Even despite the fact that the argument offered within this thesis has provided a route to DDS that is different from the traditionally aseity-couched arguments for the doctrine, it holds the same implication: one must reject all forms of *real* composition within God.

Now, as is probably clear to the reader at this point, this thesis has done very little in the way of arguing for the *reality* of the act/potency or essence/existence distinctions. This has been intentional. As was stated in the introduction, it has been the primary objective of this thesis to offer an argument for DDS that does not assume a Platonic/Aristotelian metaphysic. Despite this, there are two major implications of my argument that lend credibility to the ontologies that are often espoused by classical theists. First, it follows from what has been argued within this thesis that a Christian committed to creation *ex nihilo* has reason to reject certain realist conceptions of divine ideas/abstract objects. If divine ideas or abstract objects are supposed to be real entities existing alongside God, then they would diminish God's creative act in much the same

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1. Even those proponents of DDS committed to a robust view of the hypostatic union will be committed to the notion that the divine nature of Christ is simple.

way that God's creation of the world via pre-existing matter would. Additionally, if one

is committed to a realist conception of properties, for example, then God's creative

capacities are contingent upon something that is not-God. If God's power, for instance,

merely exemplifies some abstract entity that is itself power, then God's creative action

presupposes something in addition to God! Thus, it seems that one conclusion of the

argument within this thesis is that it weakens realist positions that are committed to

divine ideas or abstract objects as real entities that are distinct from God. What is left,

then, of the major metaphysical positions is a nominalist position and classical theism.

A second implication of the argument offered within this thesis is that it sets the

proverbial table for those who *do* hold to classical theism and Aristotelian/Platonic

metaphysical commitments to show why such ontologies are to be favored over

nominalist ones. This is because those who deny DDS, if they are to remain theists,

would, presumably, deny the real distinctions of act/potency, essence/existence, and the

like. For it would seem to follow that if act/potency or essence/existence is a real form of

composition, and if God exists, then one would have reason to deny that God is

composed in such a way in light of God's aseity (as is traditionally argued) or (from what

has been argued here) a commitment to a traditional conception of creation *ex nihilo*.

Thus, rather than sacrificing many traditional divine attributes or doctrines (i.e., creation

ex nihilo), the more modest metaphysical option would be to simply deny that the forms

of composition espoused by thinkers such as Aquinas are real forms of composition.[2] The

primary task of the classical theist, then, is to argue why, in fact, there is good reason to

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2. This is ultimately what is done by thinkers such as William Lane Craig who hold that God is, in fact, simple but, consequently, so is everything else.

believe that the distinctions of act/potency or essence/existence entail real forms of composition. So while it is not the primary task of this thesis to argue that act/potency or essence/existence are real distinctions, this thesis does lay the groundwork for proponents of Neoplatonic/Aristotelian ontologies to make such a case.[3]

What I have argued in this thesis, then, has not been to make a case for a full-fledged doctrine of DDS as was espoused by Aquinas, for example, but rather to argue primarily that any view of God as composed of proper parts ought to be rejected. Of course, as the reader might infer, I think that when confronted with a dichotomy between the realism of Aquinas's ontology and extreme nominalism, I believe we have good reason to reject nominalism and, hence, accept something like an Aristotelian/ Neoplatonic metaphysic along with a classical conception of God. But, even if we have good reason to hold to an Aristotelian or Neoplatonic metaphysic, a conception of God as simple under such a view is not without its problems.

In order to understand some of the notorious problems associated with DDS, we must first understand *what* follows from a conception of God that is absolutely simple under an Aristotelian framework. First, as has already been noted, if act/potency or essence/existence entails a real form of composition and if God is simple, then God cannot be composed of act/potency or essence/existence. Thus, God must be purely actual or existence itself. While, on its face, the assertion of God's pure actuality or God's being subsistent existence itself might not seem that problematic, it is what such a view entails that causes potential troubles. First, allow me to offer what I think to be the

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3. Later, I will (1) lay out a brief case against what Wolterstorff has called "constituent ontologies" broadly and (2) argue why there is prima facie reason to hold that act/potency and essence/existence are real forms of composition.

less controversial implications of DDS under an Aristotelian metaphysical framework. DDS entails that God is *a se*; that is, God exists independently of everything else. At least some conception of divine *aseity* seems to be important for most theists; thus, this seems to be (relatively) noncontroversial. Additionally, a conception of DDS informed by Aristotelian metaphysics will entail the doctrine of divine immutability. This is because, if God is capable of change and act/potency is a real form of composition, then God's changing would introduce potency into the divine life. Even those who would deny a Boethian or Thomistic conception of divine immutability would still hold that God is immutable in *some sense*. Furthermore, DDS that is informed by an Aristotelian metaphysic will entail a strong doctrine of divine impassibility. Despite the heavy recent criticism of the doctrine of divine impassibility, it seems to be undergoing something of a resurgence.[4] Thus, I take the doctrines of aseity, immutability, and impassibility that are implied by DDS to be the *less* controversial implications of the doctrine.

As far as what I take to be the *more* controversial implications of the doctrine, there are a few key implications to be summarized here. First, by asserting that God's essence is identical to God's existence, what follows is a denial that God is, in any way, composed of accidental (or non-essential) properties. Second, if God is wholly noncomposite, then God's attributes cannot be something distinct from God. Furthermore, if one is informed by Aristotelian or Platonic ontologies, then one does not have the luxury of merely stating that God's attributes are useful fictions. One must take

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4. For example, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

the more extreme route of holding that God is *identical* to God's attributes.[5] In particular, these two implications have caused the greatest degree of headache in the minds of *both* the detractors and proponents of DDS. Corresponding to each of these two troublesome implications of DDS are two notorious objections to DDS. First, there is Alvin Plantinga's critique of DDS offered within his lecture, *Does God Have a Nature?* Second, in its most recent iteration, is what has come to be known as the "modal collapse" objection. This objection's most outspoken recent proponent is R.T. Mullins. Allow me to address each of these objections in turn.

Contemporary Challenges to DDS

Alvin Plantinga's 1980 Aquinas lecture *Does God Have a Nature?* drew attention to one of the more problematic aspects of DDS. In particular, Plantinga takes issue with the fact that DDS (particularly Aquinas's conception of the doctrine) entails that God is *identical* with God's attributes.[6] For Plantinga, if one is committed to the idea that God must be identical with his properties (which, if one is a proponent of DDS and a realist about properties, then they must hold this), then one must hold that God has exactly one property.[7] Worse still, in fact, God must simply *be* a property![8] As Plantinga notes, there are several problems with this implication. First, if God is a property, then God cannot be a person; God cannot create the world.[9] Additionally, if God has or is one property, then

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5. Christians within the tradition were well aware of this implication. See, for example, Augustine, *City of God*, 11.10.

6. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature: The Aquinas Lecture, 1980* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 37–8.

7. Ibid., 57.

8. Ibid., 57.

9. Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature*, 47, 57. Properties do not create the world; persons do.

this seems to run directly contrary to the (seemingly obvious) view that God has multiple properties.[10] But how then ought a proponent of DDS escape Plantinga's two challenges?

While there have been many sound responses to Plantinga's critique in the decades since he initially issued it, allow me to briefly sketch some of the better responses to Plantinga's objection and then offer the line of reasoning that I see to be most convincing. It seems that one of the major veins of responses to Plantinga's lecture is to criticize the subtle Platonism informing his conception of properties. Leftow, in describing Augustine's position on the matter, notes that Augustine's identification of God with the forms is not a move to render God an abstract object but, instead, to eliminate the explanatory power of the forms while bolstering God's supremacy.[11] Thus, under Augustine's view, God does the explanatory grounding that once was reserved for the forms. Furthermore, in responding to the recent criticisms of divine simplicity, Graham Oppy notes that objections such as Plantinga's assume that for every property there must be a real object that exemplifies that property.[12] But, according to Oppy, such an account of properties need not apply to God. Rather than just some constituent part/aspect of God exemplifying some corresponding property, it could be God himself that grounds the truth of properties of God.[13] Following this move, Brower advances his notion of a "truthmaker" account of DDS.[14] For Brower, in a similar trajectory as Oppy,

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10. Ibid., 47.

11. Brian Leftow, "Divine Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 23.4 (2006): 366–7.

12. As referenced within: James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 158.

13. Ibid., 158.

14. Jeffrey E. Brower, "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 25.1 (2008): 19.

God and God alone is what renders the predications of God true. While I find responses

such as these to be appealing, there are alternative responses to objections like

Plantinga's that more effectively illustrate the problem with Plantinga's critique.

One of Plantinga's chief problems with DDS is that it fails to properly reconcile

itself with God's exemplification of a plurality of properties. But what if, as I have

already noted is present in Leftow, Oppy, and Brower, the problem with Plantinga's

critique is his conception of properties? What if the kind of properties that Plantinga

would have God exemplify are not the kind of predicates that God could exemplify?

Michelle Panchuk theorizes that to exemplify a property necessitates finitude. Panchuk

notes that

> to exemplify a property is to exist in a certain way. It is to exist *in this way*, rather
> than *in that way*. In other words, to exemplify a property is to be *delimited* and
> *finite*. For this wine to be red, it must not be (in the same way and at the same
> time) any of the other colors of the rainbow. To be a dog is to fail to be a cat and
> all of the other animals at the zoo. Furthermore, being an instance of a particular
> kind-universal and exemplifying one property may limit the range of properties
> that a particular can exemplify. Being an instance of the universal-kind *dog* means
> that the particular cannot exemplify the property of *being prime*. Properties
> impose a specific set of limits on particulars.[15] [emphasis original]

Thus, to possess a property would necessitate limitations. But God is not limited;

therefore, God cannot be understood to possess properties. This is similar to the

conclusion reached by Barry Miller in his work, *A Most Unlikely God*. Miller argues that

the properties of a thing constitute the bounds which demarcate the manner and extent of

existence it has.[16] In much the same way that lines on a polygon clearly demarcate the

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15. Michelle Panchuk, "The Simplicity of Divine Ideas" (unpublished paper), 16,
https://www.academia.edu/30372564/The_Simplicity_of_Divine_Ideas, 9.

16. Barry Miller, *A Most Unlikely God: A Philosophical Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of
Notre Dame Press, 1996), 121. Miller's concept of bound, of course, is used to demonstrate how existence
can be a predicate. It must be noted that I have no intention to exhaustively defend the notion that existence
is a predicate within this thesis.

area covered by the polygon, so too do properties demonstrate the different ways in which a given creature is finite or limited. Thus, since God is not limited in any way, God does not exemplify properties.

But does the implication of such an account of properties as limits/bounds of a thing's existence entail that we cannot predicate anything of God? Panchuk and Miller give similar answers. Panchuk notes that rather than diminishing the character of God, the denial of properties in God, gives God a far richer character than that of finite creatures. Since God is limitless, God encompasses all of the predicates of finite creatures but without the limitations that they possess.[17] Panchuk uses the illustration of an infinitely long line. Sure, an infinitely long line might fail to exemplify the property of being "an inch long," but this is not because it is limited but because it far surpasses such a property in terms of length.[18] Additionally, for Miller, since God is boundless existence, the predicates that creatures exemplify apply to God, not in a limited way, but in the greatest possible way.[19] This is because, for Miller, God is the limit of all sets of properties. But God is not a limit simpliciter; rather, God is to be understood as a limit case.[20] A limit case is an absolute limit of a series and not merely what happens to be the limit of a series.[21] Thus, since God is utterly boundless, all predicates must apply to God as a limit case. In other words, God is not the most powerful being, for example, because

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17. Panchuk, "The Simplicity of Divine Ideas," 10.

18. Ibid., 10.

19. Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*, 121.

20. Ibid., 12.

21. Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*, 10.

God just so happens to be the most powerful being but, rather, because God's power is such that it is the very limit case of the predicate/property of power.[22] As should be obvious from both Panchuk's and Miller's accounts, simply because properties do not apply to God does not entail that we cannot predicate things of God. Rather, what follows from such accounts is that if one's conceptions of properties is one that necessitates that properties are limiting concepts, then God cannot exemplify properties in that way. Thus, we can still, in good faith, predicate goodness, love, and power, of God. It must be understood, however, that God possesses such predicates in an infinite way. By virtue of being infinite, the divine essence encompasses, to the maximal degree, all predicates that may be applied to it.

Thus, contra Plantinga, God does not exemplify properties because properties necessitate finitude. Additionally, if God is limitless, then each of the predicates that would be attributed to the divine nature must be infinite and not finite. In other words, the predicates that God has must not be limited in any way. This entails that such predicates must coalesce in God. This is because, if there are hard and fast distinctions between divine predicates, then God possesses them in a limited way. Since God does not possess such predicates in a limited way, then in the divine essence predicates must coalesce. Or, as Nash-Marshall puts the matter in making a similar point, "What would it mean to claim that there is a sense in which God is not just? It would mean that his mercy is not just, that his omnipotence is not just, that his power is not just. This is not just a terrifying claim; it seems to be an absurd one. How can God truly be just if His power is not just, if

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22. We can begin to see the makings of an implicit argument for an analogical notion of predication when it comes to God. Miller makes this argument explicit within his *A Most Unlikely God*.

his mercy is not just, if his omnipotence is not just?"[23] For Nash-Marshall, predicates of God are not merely properties, but characteristics of God referring to the whole of God.[24] Predicates must be understood to coalesce within God's self, then.

But how can *this* proposal be understood to be coherent? How can two predicates of God (such as goodness and power, for example) be identical? As has already been implied, properties, insofar as they are delimited, cannot coherently be identified with each other. However, if, to use Miller's language, predicates have a limit case, then God possesses such predicates as a limit case does to a set. In other words, predicates do not apply to God in a limited way. As a result, we have reason for affirming what has already been stated: predicates must coalesce within God's self. But, if this is the case, then the concern about the coherence of identifying distinct predicates with one another is only troublesome if we speak about properties. Since God does not possess predicates as properties, which are necessarily delimiting, the concern with coherence dissolves. If, in response to God's unlimited nature, one presses how properties can coherently coalesce, this still presupposes that God possesses properties. We need not share Plantinga's worry about DDS reducing God to a property because God simply does not have properties. Additionally, this does not diminish the divine nature any more than a limit case is diminished by the set it limits. We can still truthfully and robustly describe the attributes

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23. Siobhan Nash-Marshall, "Properties, Conflation, and Divine Simplicity," *The Saint Anselm Journal* 4.2 (2007): 15.

24. Ibid., 14.

of the divine essence.[25] Thus, Plantinga's objections to DDS are not without plausible

solutions.

A second major objection to DDS concerns a problem with God's contingent

acts/knowledge of creation. One of the most recent forms of this objection comes from

R.T. Mullins and has been dubbed the "modal collapse" objection to DDS. Essentially,

the objection runs as follows: under DDS God's essence is God's existence. An

implication of this is that God is pure act and, as such, God's essence must be identical to

God's actions.[26] But, if God is identical with his action, then God must be identical with

his creative action.[27] Since God is necessarily existent, then God's act of creation must

necessarily exist. Thus, the creation of this particular world is no longer contingent and

breaks down, or "collapses," into absolute necessity.[28] This would result in holding that

the only possible world that could have been created is, in fact, the actual world. Thus,

according to Mullins, DDS seems to imply a modal collapse.

What are the potential solutions to this objection? A popular Thomistic response

to the threat of modal collapse is to invoke what Aquinas called, "suppositional

necessity."[29] Aquinas draws a distinction between something's being absolutely

necessary (necessary in and of itself), and something's being suppositionally necessary

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25. Stump, in echoing Aquinas, notes that this does not entail that all of the predicates of God are synonymous. Rather, the predicates of the divine essence differ in sense but not in reference. See, Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas*, Arguments of the Philosophers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 99.

26. Ryan T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 138.

27. Ibid., 138.

28. Ibid., 138.

29. Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 103.

(necessary through another).[30] Aquinas notes that since God is immutable (i.e., incapable of changing), then what God wills will necessarily take place.[31] But, the sort of necessity that entails that what God wills will come to pass is not an absolute necessity, but a suppositional instance of necessity. In illustrating what suppositional necessity is, Aquinas uses the example of Socrates sitting. Supposing that Socrates is sitting; then, necessarily, Socrates is sitting.[32] But it would be wrongheaded to posit that Socrates' sitting is out of *absolute* necessity. Thus, Socrates' sitting is an instance of suppositional necessity. In the same way, that God immutably wills contingent truths to come to pass *does* entail a sort of necessity (i.e., suppositional necessity), just not *absolute* necessity. The necessity of the creation of the world, for example, is only necessary on the supposition that God has immutably willed such creation.

Mullins, however, is not impressed with such responses to the modal collapse objection. Mullins rightly summarizes that the proponent of DDS who argues that God's act of creation is suppositionally necessary will also hold that God's essence is *absolutely* necessary.[33] But, argues Mullins, if the proponent of DDS affirms the (plainly true) distinction between absolute and suppositional necessity, then God's act of creation cannot be identical to God's essence! But the tenet that God's single act (which would include creation) is identical with God's essence seems to be a mainstay of classical theism. Thus, since the proponent of DDS will not give up the notion that God's essence

30. Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation*, 103.

31. ST I.19.3.

32. Ibid.

33. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 138.

is identical with God's act of creation, and since the proponent of DDS will also not reject the obvious distinction between suppositional and absolute necessity, then they are left with two options. Either the proponent of DDS can deny that God's essence is absolutely necessary or they can deny that God's creation of the world is suppositionally necessary. For Mullins, the solution is simple: simply (no pun intended) deny that God's essence is identical with God's act of creation. But, argues Mullins, since proponents of DDS will not deny such a distinction, they must commit themselves to a modal collapse. God's creation of the world is logically necessary and this world becomes the only possible world.

Are proponents of DDS, then, left to merely bite the bullet and accept the consequences of modal collapse? While some classical theists have, at least implicitly, taken this approach, there is reason to suspect that the dichotomy between God's essence being identical with his act of creation and modal collapse is a false one. Recent work by Christopher Tomaszewski indicates that the flaw in Mullins's conception of the modal collapse argument is that it is invalid on the grounds that it invalidly substitutes into a modal context.[34] Tomaszewski, in referencing Quine, notes that, "modal contexts are referentially opaque, which means that substitution into them does not generally preserve the truth of the sentence into which such a substitution has been made."[35] In echoing Quine's own example, Tomaszewski notes that simply because (1) 8 is necessarily greater than 7, and (2) the number of planets is 8, it would be invalid to infer (3) that the

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34. Christopher Tomaszewski, "Collapsing the Modal Collapse Argument: On an Invalid Argument against Divine Simplicity," *Analysis* 79.2 (2019): 280.

35. Ibid., 280.

number of planets is *necessarily* greater than 7.[36] The modal collapse argument commits

a similar fallacy by arguing (1) necessarily, God exists, (2) God is identical with God's

act of creation, to (3) necessarily, God's act of creation exists.[37] The problem,

Tomaszewski notes, is that the necessity of God's act of creation only follows from the

premises offered if God is *necessarily* identical to God's act of creation.[38] But since this

is different from the original second premise, and since most proponents of DDS are not

committed to God's being *necessarily* identical to God's creative action, proponents of

DDS are under no obligation to accept the modified version of premise 2.[39] All that

proponents of DDS are traditionally committed to is that God is identical with his act of

creation, not that God is *necessarily* identical to his act of creation.[40] So a problem with

modal collapse objections is that they are unclear as to, in what sense, God is identical

with God's act of creation.

A further example of a proponent of DDS who takes issue with the sense in which

Mullins identifies God with his act of creation comes from the work of Dwight Stanislaw.

Within his thesis, Stanislaw notes that Mullins' modal collapse objection is too vague as

to how it is that God is identical with God's act of creation. As a result, it

mischaracterizes the classical theist's position. Stanislaw mentions three possibilities for

what "God's act of creation" could mean. First, it could refer to the "principle *whereby*"

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36. Tomaszewski, *Collapsing the Modal Collapse Argument*, 280.

37. Ibid., 280.

38. Ibid., 281.

39. Ibid., 281.

40. Ibid., 280.

God creates (i.e., God in and of himself).[41] Second, it could refer merely to the effect of what God creates.[42] Or, third, it could refer to the whole event involving the creator and what is created.[43] But, as Stanislaw points out, the modal collapse objection only works if one is committed to the second or third definitions of "God's act of creation" as being necessarily true of God.[44] But proponents of DDS do not (generally) hold such a position and, as such, need not worry about the threat of modal collapse.

Feser and Miller have also highlighted that DDS need not entail that God holds all of the same properties from possible world to possible world. But the modal collapse objection seems to rely on the misconception that God must hold all of the same properties in every possible world. Many proponents of DDS have held that while God's intrinsic properties are identical from one possible world to the next, God's extrinsic properties need not remain the same. In other words, not all predicates of the divine nature need to remain the same from possible world to possible world. God can possess contingent properties so long as such properties do not *really* apply to God.[45] Feser and Miller note that God can possess what Peter Geach called "Cambridge properties."[46] A Cambridge property is a property that implies a change in extrinsic relation and not a real

41. Dwight Stanislaw, "*De Artifice Divino*: A Thomistic Account of God's Creative Act" (MA thesis, Holy Apostles College and Seminary, 2019), 47.

42. Ibid., 47.

43. Ibid., 47.

44. Ibid., 48.

45. Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 196.. It should be noted that at this stage I, like Feser, am merely using the language of "properties" in reference to God heuristically.

46. Ibid., 196.

change within an entity.[47] Feser remarks that if Socrates becomes shorter than Plato in virtue of Plato growing taller than Socrates, then this does not entail any real change within Socrates, but merely a Cambridge change. Socrates remains the same, but his relation to entities external to him has changed. So too with God. God's creation of the world can be a contingent "property" of God by virtue of being a Cambridge property and not a real/essential property. God's creation of the world need not be thought of as a property that God must essentially possess. Thus, because God's being the creator of the world is not a necessary attribute of God, the proponent of DDS has reason to reject the modal collapse objection. Within each of these responses, we can see that proponents of DDS reject the attempt to hold that God's creation of the world is necessary. In fact, the modal collapse objection presumes a sense of identity between God and God's act of creation that proponents of DDS do not hold. While there are ample more responses to this objection, what has been said here will suffice for our purposes.

Having addressed two of the most prominent objections to DDS, allow me to make a note about the metaphysical systems that often lie at the heart of DDS. Opponents of DDS can still avoid DDS by denying the very metaphysical systems that would entail a robust definition of DDS such as Aquinas's, for example. It is possible that one can, as William Lane Craig does, resist DDS by claiming that parts are not real features of the world. This, however, as has already been noted, seems to be too extreme a move. Simply because parts are not always easy to define does not entail that we have good reason to reject *all* talk of parts. Additionally, the rejection of any real parts seems to be too counter-intuitive a conclusion to accept. However, there are other, more plausible, ways

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47. Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 196.

to avoid DDS by adopting another metaphysical system. Wolterstorff, for example, suggests rejecting a constitutive ontology (an ontology which views properties as parts of the entity they describe) in favor of a relational ontology.[48] In a relational ontology, properties are in relationship to the entity they describe in virtue of said entity exemplifying those properties.[49] If one holds to a relational ontology, then one would have grounds for rejecting DDS (at least in its Thomistic form). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a full-throated defense of a constitutive ontology, it should be noted that there is ample reason to be skeptical of relational ontologies. In particular, a constitutive ontology offers a simpler ontology than a relational one. William Valicella argues that to exemplify a certain property, a thing must have a certain internal relation.[50] In other words, for a thing to exemplify redness it must simply *be* red.[51] After all it would make no sense for an object to exemplify redness *without* being red! Thus, for Vallicella, exemplification must refer to an internal relation, "one that supervenes on the intrinsic properties of its relata."[52] A thing's being red, then, is what grounds its exemplification of redness. But, as Vallicella argues, the supposed allure of relational ontologies is that they hold that a thing's having a certain property is grounded in the exemplification relation to an extrinsic universal and not that thing's intrinsic makeup.[53] But if a thing's having a certain property must be grounded in its intrinsic makeup, then to posit that it must *also*

48. See, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 531-52.

49. Ibid., 547–8.

50. William Vallicella, *A Paradigm Theory of Existence: Onto-Theology Vindicated*, Philosophical Studies Series 89 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 172.

51. Ibid., 172.

52. Ibid., 172.

53. Ibid., 172.

exemplify some extrinsic universal is superfluous. The explanatory power of relational

ontologies then is lacking and unnecessarily expands one's ontology. Constitutive

ontologies, then, seem to be simpler than relational ones (no pun intended).

Lastly, despite the focus of this thesis being on making a case for why God must

be totally non-composite and leaving it to other proponents of DDS to argue in detail as

to why act/potency and essence/existence are real forms of composition that God, by

extension, would lack, I think we have prima facie reasons for holding act/potency and

essence/existence to be real forms of composition. Regarding act/potency: while one is

free to deny that act/potency is a real form of composition, it seems that one would do so

at the risk of being forced to accept that the word is in Heraclitian flux or that it is

without change as with Parmenides' static ontology. It is clear, after all, that things are

actual. Things such as tables, frogs, and people are real. But are those same actual things

capable of undergoing change while remaining the same beings? It is, at least putatively,

the case that things can undergo change. Things could *potentially* be different. But does

such potentiality entail a real form of composition between act/potency intrinsic to things

that can change? If a thing can be changed, then this necessitates that *that* thing can be

different than it is before it is changed. The "difference" must be intrinsic to the thing that

is being changed, otherwise the change in question would merely be a "Cambridge"

change.[54] But if this is the case, then potentiality seems to supervene on the intrinsic

capacities and makeup of a thing.[55] Thus, since act and potency are distinct, and since we

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54. Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 196.

55. This argument takes some inspiration from Vallicella's comments on relational ontologies. Vallicella, *A Paradigm Theory of Existence*, 172.

have reason to hold that potencies are intrinsic to things that can change, then act and potency are real forms of composition. If this is the case, then in light of my argument, God cannot be composed of act and potency and must, therefore, be purely actual.[56] Thus, we have prima facie reason to hold that act and potency are real forms of composition.

Alternatively, we also have prima facie reason to hold that essence/existence is a real distinction within creatures. Let it be presupposed, for the sake of time, that essences are, in fact, real.[57] When I describe the nature of a horse, for example, I am describing a real thing. The nature of a horse is not just a useful fiction, there really are things that exemplify horse-nature, so to speak. But if existence was not distinct from essence, then in whatever possible world the essence of a thing was, its existence would be also.[58] But there are possible worlds in which we can have access to the essence of a thing that does not exist (e.g., we can conceive of the essence of a unicorn in *this* world).[59] However, if there was no real distinction between essence and existence, then everything with an essence would be necessarily existent (lions, and tigers, and bears!).[60] Since this is not the case, we have prima facie reason to hold that essence/existence is a real distinction within

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56. There are far more extensive and effective defenses of the act/potency distinction elsewhere. See, for example, Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God,* 17–68.

57. There are rigorous defenses of essentialism elsewhere. See, David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism*, Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy 11 (New York: Routledge, 2007).

58. Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 119.

59. Ibid., 118.

60. Ibid., 119.

things. If this is so, then God cannot be composed of essence/existence and must be, as Aquinas calls God, *ipsum esse subsistens*.[61]

From what has been argued here, one can see that even the most forceful objections to DDS are not without plausible solutions. Additionally, attempts to reject the metaphysical systems that so often inform robust conceptions of DDS are not without their consequences. And while this thesis has not extensively argued for the forms of composition that are often entailed by, say, Scholastic proponents of DDS, it has been shown that we have prima facie reason to hold that such forms of composition are real forms of composition. If this is the case, then a robust conception of DDS (of the sort that Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas would have espoused) is back on the metaphysical table and we have been able to argue to such a conception using non-traditional means.

Theological Implications of DDS

Having offered an argument for DDS on the basis of creation *ex nihilo*, defended the doctrine against recent objections, and shown why we have prima facie reason to hold that God is simple in the manner that classical theists have held God to be, let me address some theological implications of this doctrine. First, since my argument was primarily concerned with creation *ex nihilo*, allow me to tease out what is entailed for a doctrine of creation in light of creation *ex nihilo*. What lies at the heart of the creation event is not some universal, or attribute, or abstract object, or even an impersonal bit of divinity, but rather, the personal God in all of his glory. The *only* ground for the world's creation is the all-perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent deity. Additionally, God's capacity to create the world is not derived from something that is not-God and God's

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61. ST 1. 4. 2.

willing of the creation of the world mustn't be conditioned by some prior entity. God's creation of the world, then, must be understood to be an utterly free and sovereign act.[62] God must be free in the greatest possible sense and without constraint.

Additionally, a robust conception of DDS, as has been offered here, does not contradict other necessary doctrines within the Christian faith. As was discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3, DDS does not run contrary to a traditionally Nicene understanding of the Trinity. The Triune persons ought not to be thought of as proper parts of God (in fact, positing as much poses its own problems). Thus, DDS does not undermine traditional conceptions of Trinitarianism.

Moreover, while little has been said of the incarnation thus far (seeing as it is largely beyond the scope of this thesis), I would be remiss not to say something about the implications of DDS for the doctrine. DDS and the doctrine of the incarnation have often been seen to be in tension with one another. Allow me to briefly address a few concerns. First, how does an immutable God (which is entailed by DDS) "become" incarnate in a human person? Second, if DDS is true, how can we ascribe divinity to Christ? Or, more seriously, how can we ascribe the contingent properties of Christ (his human attributes) to his divinity? Each of these questions can be resolved without posing any real threat to DDS. In response to the first question, it should be noted that the kind of change that the incarnation involves in relation to the divine nature is a Cambridge change. After all, as

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62. While, of course, this may raise questions of the compatibility with God's immutability and divine action, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a thorough response to such an objection here. However, it should be noted that, as Stump argues, it is plausible that a single action might produce a plurality of effects. Stump uses the illustration of how turning on a switch might initiate a number of different effects. But God's act must be one and eternal, under DDS. Thus, God's single act (which is his willing from eternity) can produce a plurality of effects. This presents a difficulty since willing something seems to imply a disposition. Regarding the difficulty of God's willing a plurality of different events, Stump notes how God's willing of contingent truths must be grounded in his willing of himself. See, Stump, *Aquinas*, 99.

was decided at the council of Chalcedon, the incarnation does not cause a change to the divine nature.[63] Regarding the second concern, if divinity is a predicate, then Jesus Christ must exemplify divinity. Tom V. Morris notes that Christ can exemplify the essential divine attributes without ceasing to be human.[64] While lacking the divine attributes might be a limitation common to all humans other than the incarnate Christ, we need not think that such a limitation is a universal property.[65] Thus, as Morris notes, Christ incarnate is fully human (exemplifying all of the necessary attributes of humanity) without being merely human (exemplifying common limiting and accidental attributes of humanity).[66] And, lastly, regarding the third objection, while the *communicatio idiomatum* guarantees that what can be predicated of Christ's human nature can be predicated to the whole person of Christ, this applies uniquely to the incarnation. In describing Cyril of Alexandria's predication of human attributes (such as suffering and weeping) to Christ, Gavrilyuk writes, "according to Cyril, the statements 'God wept' or 'God was crucified' were theologically legitimate, as long as it was added that the subject was God-in-the-flesh, and not God outside of the framework of the incarnation."[67] Thus, the kinds of contingent properties that one finds in the incarnation can be predicated, not to the divine essence, but to God in the context of the incarnation. This, similar to the problem of immutability and the incarnation, entails that the predication of human attributes to God

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63. Everett Ferguson, *From Christ to the Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 of *Church History: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 264.

64. Thomas V. Morris, "Understanding God Incarnate," *AsTJ* 33.2 (1988): 66.

65. Ibid., 66.

66. Ibid., 66.

67. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 156.

in the incarnation ought to be understood as (something at least like) Cambridge properties. Thus the doctrine of the incarnation can plausibly be reconciled with DDS.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have explored the implications of and objections to DDS. While it is true that my argument has not primarily been concerned with arguing for the real distinctions that are often entailed by DDS (e.g., essence/existence), my argument does pave the way for such arguments to be made. Additionally, we have prima facie compelling reasons for holding that it is plausible that essence/existence or act/potency are real distinctions. Because my argument has shown that God must lack all forms of composition, then *if* such distinctions are real distinctions, God must not be composed of them. Thus, the only way to avoid a conception of DDS similar to thinkers like Aquinas is to embrace nominalism. Additionally, I examined two popular objections to DDS from Alvin Plantinga and R. T. Mullins. At its root, Plantinga's critique of DDS makes assumptions about the nature of properties that proponents of DDS simply do not share. Additionally, Mullins' objection, in particular, faces problems with its validity and does not accurately represent the way in which proponents of DDS would hold that God is identical to God's act of creation. I then offered some thoughts on the theological ramifications of DDS in general, and in particular, addressed the apparent tensions between DDS and the doctrine of the incarnation. Despite the challenges that a robust account of DDS faces, the metaphysical assumptions underpinning it enjoy prima facie plausibility and the objections to it are not without reasonable responses.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Summary

My chief claim in this thesis has been that the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity is a necessary condition for affirming creation *ex nihilo*. My argument rested on two premises. First, if God's creative actions must be derived from something that is not-God, then God cannot create *ex nihilo*. This was demonstrated by two lines of argumentation. On the one hand, a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo* holds that God does not make use of what I have called non-divine means in his creation of the world. A means is merely a ground that must be actively employed by an agent to perform some action. I then showed that there is a strong vein of witnesses within the Christian tradition which hold to a conception of creation *ex nihilo* that entails (at least de facto) that God does not make use of non-divine means in his creation of the world. Additionally, via conceptual analysis, I argued that what is problematic about God's use of non-divine means is precisely their lack of divinity. On the other hand, if God's creative action must be grounded in something that is not-God, then God must make use of non-divine means to create the world. This is because given that God is omniscient, sovereign, and free, God must actively employ all grounds that are relevant to his act of creation. From these two reasons, it follows that if God's creative actions must be derived from something that is not-God, then God cannot create *ex nihilo*.

Second, I argued that a God composed of parts must derive its creative action from something that is not-God. This is because a composite entity cannot act wholly independently of its parts. Thus, a God that is composed of parts must derive its creative action from (at least) one of its parts. But, a proper part of God is not-God in terms of identity or predication. And since a God that must derive its creative action from something that is not-God cannot create *ex nihilo*, a God composed of parts cannot create *ex nihilo*. As a result, DDS becomes a necessary condition for one to affirm creation *ex nihilo*.

I then explored the implications of and objections to DDS. While the primary focus of my thesis was not to argue for the real distinctions affirmed by classical theists (e.g., act/potency), my argument does entail that God must not possess any real proper parts. I then argued that unless one goes to the nominalist extreme of denying all forms of constitution, then we are likely left with a conception of DDS that is similar to that espoused by thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. Additionally, we have prima facie reasons to hold that the classical distinctions of act/potency and essence/existence are real distinctions. In light of my argument, then, God must be devoid of such distinctions. Thus, assuming that extreme forms of nominalism are not an option, my argument seems to entail that a classical variation of DDS is true.

Areas for Additional Research

Within the fourth chapter of this thesis, I indicated that my argument essentially tries to eliminate any middle position between nominalism and realism couched in a robust conception of DDS (as is found in, say, Aquinas). This is because conceptions of God as composite and/or realist conceptions of properties, divine ideas, and abstract

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objects all pose the same problem for creation *ex nihilo*: They entail that God's creative action must be derived from something that is not-God. The only tenable positions for one seeking to maintain a historically informed conception of creation *ex nihilo*, then, become nominalism (and a rejection of all constituent ontologies) or DDS. Because this was the thrust of my argument, I did not offer any exhaustive arguments against nominalism or for an Aristotelian/Neoplatonic metaphysic.[1] As a result, future developments of this work would likely be bolstered by an exhaustive treatment of nominalism, on the one hand, and an argument for Aristotelian distinctions (such as act/potency), on the other. Despite the work left to be done, from what has been argued within this thesis, one can see that DDS can be reasonably defended from basic Christian commitments (i.e., creation *ex nihilo*). It is not necessary to conceive of DDS as a merely Greek doctrine inferred from sources outside of what God has revealed. Rather, God's simplicity follows from the most basic of Christian commitments: It is God who creates, sustains, and rules over the cosmos. The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity ultimately entails that the personal God is at the foundation of all reality and not, say, some abstract object or property.

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1. This is partly to do with the fact that, from the outset, I have tried to limit the amount of operative metaphysical assumptions within this thesis.

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