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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Divine simplicity as symmetric parthood

Nathaniel Gan

Department of Philosophy, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore
Email: nat_gan@outlook.com

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Abstract

Taken at face value, the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS) says that God lacks proper parts, but the doctrine is also often formulated as a thesis identifying God with all his parts. The two formulations are not generally equivalent – on some plausible mereological theories, something can lack proper parts by being a part of all its (possibly distinct) parts. Thus, the DDS can be alternatively formulated as a thesis saying that God is part of all his parts – call this the symmetry formulation. The symmetry formulation is viable as a thesis about God's relation to his attributes, because instantiation can plausibly be modelled as parthood. Moreover, the symmetry formulation retains the usual motivations for divine simplicity coming from the doctrines of aseity, transcendence, immutability, and unity. The symmetry formulation also addresses common objections to divine simplicity regarding distinctness in God's attributes and those coming from modal collapse arguments.

Keywords: divine simplicity; mereology; modal collapse; parthood; antisymmetry; Alvin Plantinga

The doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS) says that God is simple. Taken at face value as a thesis about God's mereology, DDS says that God lacks (proper) parts. As Aquinas writes, 'there is neither composition of quantitative parts in God ... nor composition of matter and form ... God is nowise composite, but is altogether simple' (Aquinas 2005b) and 'in God there is no potentiality: therefore there is not in Him any composition' (Aquinas 2005a). Anselm, likewise, writes that 'the Supreme Substance exists without beginning and without end ... is immutable and without parts' (Saint Anselm 2000).

DDS is also often formulated as an identity claim saying that God is numerically identical to his parts. Aquinas, for instance, takes DDS to include the claim that 'God is the same as His essence or nature' (Aquinas 2005b), while Augustine writes 'those things which are essentially and truly divine are called simple, because in them quality and substance are identical' (Saint Augustine 1999). DDS has also been defended as an identity thesis by other traditional Christian writers like Anselm, Boethius, and Irenaeus, and Islamic writers like Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra.[1] Among contemporary authors as well, James Dolezal summarizes DDS with the slogan 'all that is in God is God' (Dolezal 2017) and Brian Leftow views DDS as including the claim that 'God's relation to His necessary intrinsic attributes is *identity* – that God is identical with omnipotence, identical with omniscience and so on' (Leftow 1990, 581–598).

Under classical mereology, the two formulations of DDS are equivalent – something lacks proper parts if and only if it is identical to all its parts. However, this equivalence does not

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generally hold. On some plausible mereological theories, something can lack proper parts by being a part of all its parts, even if it is not identical to all its parts. Thus, it is possible to formulate DDS as a thesis saying that God is simple in the sense of being a part of all his parts – call this the *symmetry formulation* of DDS. The symmetry formulation has thus far received little attention in the literature, with the exception of Cotnoir (2017), who modelled trinitarianism in terms of mutual parthood relations between the divine persons. Nevertheless, this paper will argue that the symmetry formulation is a viable way of understanding DDS, particularly as a thesis about God's relation to his attributes.

In what is to come, section 'Mereology' argues that a wide range of plausible mereological theories leaves open the possibility of the symmetry formulation. Section 'Instantiation' argues that DDS under the symmetry formulation is viable as a thesis about God's relation to his attributes. Section 'Motivations' argues that the symmetry formulation retains the usual motivations of DDS coming from various traditional doctrines regarding God's attributes. Sections 'Properties' and 'Modality' argue that the symmetry formulation addresses common objections to DDS regarding distinctness and contingency in God's attributes.

Mereology

Classical mereology concerns the parthood relation, which is stipulated to satisfy the following three properties.[2]

> **Reflexivity.** Everything is an improper part of itself.
> **Antisymmetry.** If x and y are improper parts of each other, then $x = y$.
> **Transitivity.** If x is an improper part of y and y is an improper part of z, x is an improper part of z.

Although improper parthood offers a viable concept of parthood, DDS cannot plausibly be interpreted as a thesis that God lacks parts in this sense, because the reflexivity of improper parthood implies that God has at least himself as a part. Instead, DDS is more plausibly understood as saying that God lacks *proper* parts – call this the *mereological formulation* of DDS.

> **Mereological formulation.** God has no proper parts.

The mereological formulation seems to be a reasonable initial explication of DDS, since simplicity is after all naturally understood as a mereological concept.[3] But the mereological formulation is potentially ambiguous, because proper parthood can be defined in several ways. On one possible definition, proper parthood is *distinct* parthood:

> **Distinct parthood.** x is a proper part of y iff x is an improper part of and $x \neq y$.

Alternatively, proper parthood can be defined as *non-symmetric* parthood:

> **Non-symmetric parthood.** x is a proper part of y iff x is an improper part of y and y is not an improper part of x.

The former definition is more typical, but the latter has been considered in the accounts of mereology given by Leonard and Goodman (1940), Simons (1987), Casati and Varzi (1999), Cotnoir (2010), and Cotnoir and Bacon (2012), among others. How the mereological formulation is further explicated depends on which definition of proper parthood is adopted.

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If proper parthood is distinct parthood, the mereological formulation of DDS is equivalent to the common understanding of DDS as a thesis identifying God with his parts – call this the *identity formulation* of DDS.

Identity formulation. God is identical to all his improper parts.

But if proper parthood is defined as non-symmetric parthood, then explicating proper parthood in the mereological formulation yields the symmetry formulation of DDS.

Symmetry formulation. God is an improper part of all his improper parts.

Under classical mereology, the difference between the identity and symmetry formulations is merely notational. The antisymmetry of improper parthood entails that to be a distinct part is to be a non-symmetric part, and hence that the identity and symmetry formulations of DDS are logically equivalent. So whenever classical mereology is assumed, the usual discussions of DDS as an identity thesis leave open the possibility that DDS can also be understood according to the symmetry formulation.

However, there are independent reasons to consider mereological theories without antisymmetry, and indeed some such theories have been discussed in the literature.[4] There are also intuitive cases, apart from DDS, that appear to violate antisymmetry. It might be thought that constitution involves mutual parthood, such that when a statue is made from a lump of clay, the statue and clay are parts of each other, but the two nevertheless remain distinct (Cotnoir 2010, 396–405; Thomson 1998, 149–173). Similarly, Cotnoir and Bacon (2012), Cotnoir (2017), and Molto (2018) argue that trinitarianism can be modelled in such a way that the divine persons are parts of each other, in which case the distinctness of these persons would violate antisymmetry.

If antisymmetry is not assumed, then the two definitions of proper parthood diverge: all identical parts are symmetric parts (by reflexivity), but the converse fails when parthood is not antisymmetric. Accordingly, DDS under the symmetric formulation is strictly weaker than under the identity formulation: if God lacks distinct parts, he also lacks non-symmetric parts, but not *vice versa*. Hence, if proper parthood is defined as non-symmetric parthood, the mereological formulation of DDS is no longer equivalent to the identity formulation, but equivalent instead to the symmetry formulation.

The upshot is that as far as the formal mereological framework goes, the symmetry formulation presents a viable and distinct way of understanding DDS. The viability of the symmetry formulation is given by the fact that it is equivalent to the mereological formulation if parthood is assumed antisymmetric, or if proper parthood is defined as non-symmetric parthood, either of which would be independently plausible. The distinctness of the symmetry formulation from the identity formulation is given by the fact that the two are non-equivalent whenever parthood is not antisymmetric, which is also a reasonable possibility.

To be sure, adopting the symmetry formulation does not require abandoning the identity formulation altogether, nor is it being suggested that antisymmetry should be altogether dropped from our concept of parthood. Given the range of applications of mereology, it is possible that parthood relations between different kinds of entities may vary. In particular, parthood could obey classical mereology in ordinary instances, with violations of antisymmetry limited to atypical cases like constitution or cases involving God. Indeed, it will be seen in section 'Motivations' that some of the usual motivations for DDS can be upheld by taking the mereological relations involving God to differ from those between ordinary objects, particularly with respect to antisymmetry. Insofar as parthood behaves

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antisymmetrically, the identity formulation of DDS is not ruled out by the symmetry formulation, and is in fact equivalent to it.

Another point of clarification is that the symmetry formulation is not intended to be an interpretation of DDS as traditionally presented. DDS is often discussed as an identity thesis by both traditional and contemporary authors, and by both proponents and opponents of the doctrine. So insofar as the identity and symmetry formulations are not equivalent, the latter would deviate from popular presentations of DDS.

Instantiation

DDS is sometimes taken to be a general claim that God lacks proper parts of any kind, with some authors even denying that God instantiates composition by being part of something else (Aquinas 2005b).[5] This paper will focus just on the implications of DDS for God's relations to his attributes. One reason for this focus is that simplicity with respect to attributes would set God apart from other entities more distinctly than simplicity with respect to other kinds of parthood, in line with a common motivation for DDS from God's transcendence (see section 'Motivations'). While God may lack spatiotemporal parts, this would not be a unique feature of God if there are other kinds of abstracta, such as mathematical entities, which also lack spatiotemporal parts. In contrast, entities other than God are not usually taken to be simple with respect to their properties. Furthermore, some popular objections against DDS concern God's relation to his attributes (see sections 'Properties' and 'Modality'), so an analysis of this kind of simplicity may shed light on how DDS can be defended against common objections.

When it comes to God's relation to his attributes, the symmetry formulation raises the question of how the relation between objects and their properties can be modelled as a form of parthood.[6] Furthermore, if the symmetry formulation is to present a genuine alternative to the identity formulation, it should also be plausible that parthood in this sense can violate antisymmetry. And, it has to be plausible that proper parthood can be defined as non-symmetric parthood, if the symmetry formulation is to be viable here. This section will address these issues.

Some authors argue that the instantiation relation can be modelled as parthood.[7] On the mereological bundle theory suggested by Laurie Paul (2002, 2006, 2012, 2017), for instance, objects are mereological fusions of the properties they bear. Similarly, on a mereological nominalist view of properties, properties are mereological fusions of their instances (Effingham 2020, 160–185; Zemach 1982, 527–537). To lend legitimacy to these suggestions, it might be considered how instantiation resembles more familiar instances of parthood. In ordinary cases, parthood is closely related to *connection*, in that whenever one thing is a part of another, whatever is connected to the first thing becomes connected also to the second. Since my left hand is part of my body, whatever comes into contact with my left hand thereby comes into contact with my body. Indeed, in some extensions of mereology involving both parthood and connection, parthood is defined by this relation to connection (Clarke 1981, 204–218, 1985, 61–75; Randell et al 1992, 165–176).

The notion of connection admits an analogue between properties, namely, as *resemblance*. It has been suggested that similarity between properties can be quantified in such a way that degrees of dissimilarity form a distance-like metric (Bigelow 1976, 299–320, 1977, 459–472; Blumson 2018, 211–239). So just as ordinary objects are connected in the sense of spatial contact if they are close enough with respect to spatial distance, properties (and collections thereof) can be said to be connected in the sense of resemblance if they are close enough with respect to similarity. A reasonable notion of parthood can then be constructed in terms of connection in this sense: one property (collection) is part of another

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just in case whatever becomes more similar to the first also thereby becomes more similar to the second.[8]

When objects are seen as collections of the properties they bear, instantiation becomes a particular case of this kind of parthood. Whenever an object *o* has a property *p*, whatever bears a property more similar to *p* also thereby becomes more similar to *o*; hence *p* is part of *o* with respect to similarity. Whenever something has a property more similar to that of being a hand, that thing thereby becomes more similar to my left hand; the property of being a hand is thus part of my left hand. It is also possible, at least in principle, for objects to be part of properties with respect to similarity: an object *o* is part of a property *p* just in case nothing can become more similar to *o* without bearing a property that is more similar to *p*.[9] My left hand is not part of the property of being a hand, since my left foot is more similar to my left hand than my right foot is (since the former two but not the latter two share the property of being on the left side of my body), but my feet do not differ in similarity with respect to the property of being a hand. In this way, relations between objects and properties, in both directions, can be legitimately modelled in terms of parthood.

The possibility of parthood relations in both directions opens the further possibility of mutual parthood between distinct property bundles. If God is related to his omniscience in such a way that whatever becomes more similar to God also thereby has a property that is more similar to God's omniscience, and conversely, then God and his omniscience would be parts of each other with respect to similarity. Of course, one way for this to be the case is for God to be identical to his omniscience. But it is also possible, at least in principle, for this symmetric parthood relation to hold while God remains numerically distinct from his omniscience. The possibility of such cases would imply that parthood with respect to similarity is not generally antisymmetric.

Parthood in this sense is also compatible with a definition of proper parthood as non-symmetric parthood. On Paul's mereological bundle theory, the proper parthood relation is required to satisfy irreflexivity, asymmetry, transitivity, and supplementation (Paul 2002, 578–596, 2006, 623–659, 2017). If proper parthood is defined as non-symmetric parthood with respect to similarity, it would immediately be irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive. Proper parthood also satisfies supplementation: if a property (bundle) p_1 is not part of another p_2 with respect to similarity, there is a property p in respect of which something can be more similar to p_1 without becoming more similar to p_2 – p would then be disjoint from p_2. Since my left hand is not part of the property of being a hand, it has properties that are disjoint from the property of being a hand, such as the property of being on the left side of my body.

The upshot is that the relations between objects and their properties can be modelled mereologically in such a way that DDS on the symmetry formulation is viable as a thesis about the relation between God and his attributes.

Motivations

Although DDS under the symmetry formulation is weaker than under the identity formulation, this section will argue that the symmetry formulation retains four commonly held motivations for DDS, namely those coming from traditionally held doctrines regarding God's aseity, transcendence, immutability, and unity. The doctrine of aseity says that God metaphysically depends on nothing other than himself, the doctrine of transcendence says that God is unlike everything else, the doctrine of immutability says that God's intrinsic nature cannot change, and the doctrine of unity says that there are no divisions in God's nature. DDS has traditionally been motivated by these four doctrines. For example:

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> Every composite is posterior to its component parts, and is dependent on them; but God is the first being ... In every composite there is something which is not it itself ... since God is absolute form, or rather absolute being, He can be in no way composite (Aquinas 2005b).

> There is, accordingly, a good which is alone simple, and therefore alone unchangeable, and this is God ... The nature of the Trinity is called simple, because it has not anything which it can lose (Saint Augustine 1999).

> God should not be regarded as older than His creations by any period of time, but rather by the peculiar property of His own single nature. For the infinite changing of temporal things tries to imitate the ever simultaneously present immutability of His life (Boethius 2009).

> Everything composite needs for its existence the parts of which it is composed; and what it is it owes to its parts ... Hence, if the Supreme Nature were composed of many goods, then what holds true of everything composite would also have to hold true of it ... Therefore, since this Nature is in no respect composite and yet is in every respect those very many goods, all those goods must be one rather than many (Saint Anselm 2000).

Among contemporary authors, Bennett (1969) considers transcendence and immutability, Dolezal (2017) considers all four doctrines as motivations, Leftow (1990) considers aseity and immutability, Rogers and Rogers (1996), Brower (2008), and Fowler (2013) consider aseity, and Platter (2020) and Platter (2021) consider transcendence.[10]

Consider first God's aseity. Metaphysical dependence relations are typically thought to track parthood relations, such that if one thing is part of another, the second thing depends on the first (Casati and Varzi 1999; Fine 1995, 463–485).[11] Aseity hence appears to require that God have no parts other than himself. However, it is implausible that *improper* parthood entails dependence, because dependence is usually thought to be irreflexive (Correia 2010, 251–279; Fine 2012, 37–80; Raven 2013, 191–199), while improper parthood is reflexive. Even if there are reflexive instances of dependence (Jenkins 2011, 267–276), it would seem too strong to hold that everything depends on itself. Instead, the parthood-dependence relation is more plausibly understood as an entailment from proper parthood (in some sense) to dependence. Moreover, instances in which distinct things are parts of each other would be at odds with the usual understanding of dependence as asymmetric,[12] so it would square better with our usual understanding for dependence to follow from non-symmetric parthood, rather than distinct parthood more generally. And if dependence tracks non-symmetric parthood, then the doctrine of aseity requires only that God lack non-symmetric parts, as the symmetry formulation posits.

DDS is also thought to uphold God's transcendence by making God unique in the way he relates to his attributes. The symmetry formulation maintains this motivation, because ordinary objects are not parts of their properties. Namely, objects with plural properties are usually not related to a particular property in such a way that nothing can be more similar to the object without bearing a property more similar to that particular one. Instead, ordinary cases are more like that of my left hand, which bears a plurality of properties in such a way that something can be more similar to my left hand without bearing a property more similar to that of being a hand. Moreover, objects do not usually have properties that are all parts of each other. My left hand has at least two properties: that of being on the left side of my body and that of being a hand. But something can be more similar to the former

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without being more similar to the latter, so the former is not part of the latter. Hence, the symmetry formulation makes God unique by positing that God is part of all his attributes, which are also all parts of each other.

Third, under the symmetry formulation of DDS, God's immutability can be maintained by taking some parthood relations between God and his attributes to be necessary. This view of parthood may be independently motivated: if instantiation is modelled as parthood, then for any object at all to have necessary properties requires that some parthood relations be necessary. And if God is taken to bear mutual and necessary parthood relations to the properties that constitute his intrinsic nature, God would have these properties necessarily and hence unchangingly, which yields immutability.

Under the symmetric formulation, God's attributes may not be numerically identical to each other, but the posited symmetric parthood relations between them nevertheless share some important features of identity. For one, symmetric parthood is an equivalence relation. Also, the transitivity of parthood implies that whenever two things are parts of each other, they have all the same parts and are parts of all the same things. That is, just as numerically identical objects are indiscernible with respect to their properties, objects that are parts of each other are indiscernible with respect to mereology. In particular, when objects are parts of each other with respect to similarity, they are also indiscernible in that whatever becomes more similar to one object also thereby becomes more similar to the other. Hence, under the symmetry formulation of DDS, God's nature can be said to admit no discernible divisions, even if his attributes are not numerically identical to each other.

To be sure, DDS may have other motivations, such as possible considerations involving God's sovereignty, timelessness, or goodness (Feser 2010; Stump 2023, 780–795). But the four motivations considered in this section are perhaps the most common ones, and insofar as they are representative, the discussion above shows that the symmetric formulation retains the motivations of DDS.

Properties

Some popular objections have been raised against DDS on the grounds that we intuitively expect distinctions between God and his attributes. First, if God is his omniscience, then God is a property (or property instance). Besides being unintuitive, this might imply that God's omniscience is self-exemplifying (Miller 1994, 474–477), and make it difficult to explain how God can interact with the world if properties (or property instances) are causally inert (Hasker 2016, 699–725; Plantinga 1980; Swinburne 1994). Second, if God is simultaneously his omniscience and his omnipotence, the transitivity of identity seems to imply that God's omniscience is his omnipotence; but the two seem intuitively to be distinct (Morreall 1978; Moreland and Craig 2003; Baddorf 2016, 67–70; Plantinga 1980). Third, the identification of God with his properties raises the question of how things can share in some but not all of God's attributes. Since God is good, someone resembles God insofar as they are good. But if resemblance is understood as property sharing, then DDS seems to imply that someone who resembles God by being good also possesses all of God's attributes, and perhaps even God himself (Morris 1985; Hughes 1989, 299–318).

In response, some defenders of DDS argue that God can be a property (instance) without the purported unintuitive consequences following (Mann 1982, 451–471, 1986, 343–353; Schärtl 2018, 23–60; Vallicella 1992, 508–525, 1994, 478–481; Wolterstorff 1992, 133–149), while some deny that God shares his attributes at all (Miller 1996; Vallicella 1999, 614–616). Others give an account of property attribution on which DDS, even under the identity formulation, does not identify God with his properties (Bergmann and Brower 2005, 357–386; Brower 2008, 105–128; Fowler 2013, 114–138; Oppy 2003, 10–22; Pruss 2008, 150–167).

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Yet other authors propose alternative formulations of DDS (Burns 1989, 271–293; Immink 1987; Frame 2002; Leftow 2006, 365–380; Swinburne 1994).

This section will argue that the symmetry formulation can address all three difficulties. It is not the goal here to argue that this line of defence is preferable to extant alternatives, but it may be noted as a strength of the symmetry formulation that it remains equivalent to the mereological formulation under a range of common mereological frameworks, as noted in section 'Mereology'. In contrast, some alternative accounts of DDS explicate simplicity in non-mereological terms. Gerrit Immink (1987) and Robert Burns (1989), for instance, formulate DDS as a thesis positing harmony among God's attributes. Since this formulation uses an alternative understanding of 'simplicity' that deviates from its usual mereological definition, it sheds little light on the plausibility of DDS when interpreted at face value as a thesis about God's mereology. That is, whether God's attributes exist in harmony says little about whether God has proper parts. On the other hand, the usual equivalence between the symmetry and mereological formulations suggests that the defensibility of one implies also the defensibility of the other.

The first two difficulties are immediately avoided under the symmetry formulation. DDS under the symmetry formulation allows for God and his attributes to be numerically distinct from each other, and hence does not entail that God is a property (instance), or that God's attributes are all identical. To be sure, DDS requires that God and his attributes all be parts of each other, but this is hardly an unacceptable implication. It does not seem implausible that something becomes more similar to God insofar as it bears a property more similar to God's omniscience, or that something becomes more similar to God's omniscience insofar as it is more similar to God's omnipotence.

The difficulty regarding property sharing is less easily resolved. Since God and his attributes are parts of God's goodness under the symmetry formulation, the transitivity of parthood implies that someone who resembles God by having his goodness as a part also has God and his other attributes as parts. Even if this does not mean that someone instantiates all of God's attributes (since not all instances of parthood represent instantiation – see n. 9), the implication is itself unintuitive. Nevertheless, this implication can be avoided by adopting an alternative, weaker, account of resemblance, on which two things resemble each other just in case they each have one in a pair of sufficiently similar properties. That is, in terms of the interpretation suggested in section 'Instantiation', resemblance can be taken to consist in connection with respect to similarity, rather than overlap. Then, for someone to resemble God in terms of goodness requires not that they have God's goodness itself, but only that they have a sufficiently similar property like (say) the property of imperfect goodness. And since God and his attributes are not part of this latter property, even on the symmetry formulation of DDS, the implication no longer follows that someone who resembles God in goodness has God and his attributes as parts.

The suggested account of resemblance also addresses the property sharing difficulty under the identity formulation, albeit with stronger commitments regarding degrees of resemblance. If God is his goodness, then something resembles God to exactly the same degree as it resembles God's goodness. The symmetry formulation is committed only to a weaker (and perhaps more plausible) claim: something resembles God more as it bears a property that is more similar to God's goodness, and *vice versa*.

Modality

Another group of objections to DDS falls under the broad heading of *modal collapse arguments*, according to which DDS runs into difficulties with various kinds of contingency.

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On Tomaszewski's (2019, 275–284) formulation, these arguments proceed as follows.[13] If God's existence is necessary, as is usually held, DDS seems to entail that every aspect of God, being identical to him, is also necessary. But if all of God's acts are necessary, then God cannot act differently from how he actually does, which implies that God lacks free will. Moreover, God's omniscience entails that for any true proposition *p*, God knows that *p*. If God's knowledge that *p* is necessary, it follows from the factivity of knowledge that is necessary, and hence that there are no contingently true propositions. Objections along these lines have been put forth by authors such as Hughes (1989), Wolterstorff (1992), Moreland and Craig (2003), Hasker (2016), Leftow (2016), Mullins (2016), Mullins (2022), and Waldrop (2022).

In response, some defenders of DDS propose alternative accounts on which God is related to his attributes not by identity, but by a contingent relation (Oppy 2003, 10–22; Pruss 2008, 150–167), or a relation that allows for contingency in God's attributes even if he is himself necessary (O'connor 1999; Huneeus 2024, 407–408; Pruss 2008, 150–167). Other authors maintain that God is identical to his attributes, but argue that their necessity does not follow from God's (Grant 2012, 254–274; Mann 2015, 44–56; Nemes 2020, 101–119; Tomaszewski 2019, 275–284) or that their necessity is nevertheless compatible with contingency in our world (Rogers 2024, 375–390; Schmid 2022, 3–22).

The symmetry formulation offers a possible way in which God's relation to his attributes can be contingent under DDS, namely, by taking God to be related to some of his attributes by contingent (mutual) parthood relations. The account of God's immutability suggested in section 'Motivations' stipulates that some parthood relations between God and his attributes are necessary, but it does not require that this be the case for all of God's attributes, only those that constitute his intrinsic nature. Immutability thus allows that God may be involved in both necessary and contingent parthood relations. Indeed, if instantiation is modelled as parthood, ordinary objects with both necessary and contingent properties will be involved in both necessary and contingent parthood relations. The combination of different modalities in God's mereology is thus not unusual.

The suggested account of immutability may even be compatible with contingency in God's intrinsic properties if finer distinctions are drawn between the kinds of modality involved. The doctrine of immutability requires only that God's intrinsic properties be unchanging, that is, that these properties be *temporally* necessary. But the doctrine of immutability, taken strictly at face value, is compatible with these properties being *metaphysically* contingent. To be sure, such a distinction would call for an account of how something can have metaphysically contingent intrinsic properties, but if this potential issue can be resolved, the idea that God could bear temporally necessary and metaphysically contingent parthood relations to some of his properties would not itself be unusual. Ordinary objects may have metaphysically contingent properties that, in actuality, remain unchanged while they exist – most buildings in our world do not change their location for as long as they stand, but their locations are not metaphysically necessary.

This account leaves the defender of DDS with two ways of explaining contingency in God's will and knowledge. In actuality, God is willing to create the world, so God and his willingness to create are parts of each other. If God's willingness to create is not taken to be an aspect of his intrinsic nature, these parthood relations may simply be taken to be contingent, without the need for distinctions between the kinds of modality involved. Then, there is a possible world in which God exists (by necessity), but does not have a willingness to create and hence does not, which implies that God's actual creative act is free. Alternatively, if God's willingness to create is taken to be an aspect of his intrinsic (and hence unchanging) nature, such a possible world can still be taken to exist if God's willingness to create is seen

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as one of his temporally necessary but metaphysically contingent attributes.[14] God's actual creative act hence remains free in this case.

Similarly, in actuality, God knows as an implication of omniscience that snow is white, such that God, his omniscience, and his knowledge that snow is white are all parts of each other. The parthood relations between God and his omniscience can be taken to be necessary (since omniscience is in God's intrinsic nature), while those involving God's knowledge that snow is white are taken to be (metaphysically) contingent. Then, there could be a possible world in which God does not have the knowledge that snow is white, but God remains omniscient because snow is not white. That snow is white is thus a contingent truth in actuality.

Conclusion

DDS has often been understood as a thesis identifying God with all his parts. However, this paper has argued that there is a viable alternative formulation of DDS as a thesis that God is part of all his parts. The viability of this formulation is suggested by the observations that there are plausible mereological theories under which mereological simplicity consists in lacking non-symmetric parts, and that the relation between objects and their properties can plausibly be understood in terms of parthood. Moreover, this formulation of DDS retains the doctrine's usual motivations and addresses its usual difficulties.

This paper has focused mainly on the relation between God and his attributes, but the symmetric formulation may also bear on other issues. It has been suggested that DDS potentially runs into difficulties with trinitarianism (Barrett 2016; Cotnoir 2017, 123–151; Hughes 1989; Long 2016; Platter 2020), God's timelessness (Morris 1988; Jenson 2002, 161–174; Rogers and Rogers 1996, 165–186), first-order logic (Kraal 2011, 282–294), and the relation between God's existence and essence (Hughes 1989), some of which difficulties could potentially be addressed by the symmetric formulation. For instance, Jenson (2002) considers the following potential difficulty regarding God's relation to time that might arise for DDS. On a perdurantist view of persistence, objects persist across time by having temporal parts at various times. But DDS on the usual understanding implies that God has no temporal proper parts, and hence cannot exist across extended periods of time, which makes it difficult to explain how God can interact with the world. The symmetry formulation offers a possible way of reconciling DDS with perdurantism, since it allows that God can have distinct temporal parts, so long as he is a part (in some plausible sense) of all of them. Whether this is indeed a viable model of God's relation to time under DDS requires more thorough investigation in future work, but what may be observed at this point is that the symmetry formulation potentially addresses issues raised for DDS beyond those pertaining to God and his attributes.

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Notes

1. For surveys, see Saeedimehr (2007), Dolezal (2011), and Barrett (2016).
2. Classical mereology also stipulates that parthood is extensional and satisfies unrestricted composition – see Casati and Varzi (1999) and Simons (1987). For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to consider the three properties here.
3. For non-mereological interpretations of simplicity, see Burns (1989) and Immink (1987).
4. An example is the Region Connection Calculus, which is used to model commonsense spatial reasoning in AI systems (Gan 2023, 639–669; Li and Ying 2003, 121–146; Stell 2000, 111–136).
5. Though see Kelleher (2022) for a formulation of DDS on which God is part of everything.
6. This issue does not arise with the identity formulation because it uses only non-mereological terms. While mereology is required to show how the identity formulation can be derived from the mereological formulation, the identity formulation itself can be applied by identifying God with his attributes, without any parthood relations involved.
7. The relation between objects and the properties they bear is here called 'instantiation', but the argument to come will not depend on this choice of locution. Other terms in the literature used to refer to similar relations include 'exemplification' and 'participation', which can be used if desired.
8. This account of parthood assumes some precision in our understanding of the properties under consideration, and might deliver unintuitive results when it comes to vague or graded properties. For example, we might expect the property of being warm to be a part of the property of being comfortably warm, but it is possible for something to be warmer (and hence have its temperature more similar to the property of being warm) while being less comfortably warm (and hence have its temperature less similar to that of being comfortably warm). For discussion on resemblance comparisons involving qualitative properties, see Marshall (2025). Thanks to a reviewer for highlighting this point.
9. This kind of parthood might not be instantiation, and indeed it is not generally the case that every instance of parthood with respect to similarity represents instantiation. Ordinary cases of instantiation are not transitive: Socrates instantiates the property of being mortal, and the property of being mortal instantiates the property of being a property, but Socrates does not instantiate the property of being a property. It hence seems reasonable that the ancestral of parthood relations representing instantiation should not itself represent instantiation, despite still being parthood.
10. For arguments to the contrary, see Morris (1988), Baddorf (2016), and Hasker (2016), who argue that aseity is insufficient to motivate DDS. Davis (2024) argues that immutability and transcendence do not require DDS.
11. Some authors deny this relation between parthood and dependence – see, for instance, Inman (2017) and McDaniel (2017). Johnston (2006) in particular denies the connection between aseity and DDS by denying the connection between parthood and dependence.
12. Some authors have argued that dependence could be symmetric – see Schaffer (2012), Bliss (2014), Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015), Thompson (2016), Cotnoir (2017), and Barnes (2018). Cotnoir (2017) in particular suggests that when it comes to God's nature, the possibility of symmetric parthood implies that dependence is not generally asymmetric.
13. For alternative formulations, see Schmid (2022) and Waldrop (2022).
14. Thanks to a reviewer for pressing for precision on this point.

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