Collapsing the Modal Collapse Argument: On an Invalid Argument Against Divine Simplicity

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Abstract
One of the most pressing objections against Divine simplicity is that it entails what is commonly termed a “modal collapse,” whereby all contingency is eliminated and every true proposition rendered necessarily true. In this paper, I show that a common form of this argument is in fact famously invalid and examine three ways in which the opponent of Divine simplicity might try to repair the argument. I conclude that there is no clear way of repairing the argument that does not beg the question.

1 Introduction

The doctrine of Divine simplicity, according to which God is absolutely simple, has been out of favor for a while now in both Christian theology and philosophy. It is accused of being inconsistent with the doctrine of the Incarnation (Hughes 1989: 253–264), with that of the Trinity (Moreland and Craig 2003: 586), and of being incoherent in its own right (Plantinga 1980: 46–61). But one of the most powerful objections to the doctrine is that it is incompatible with Divine freedom and with real contingency in the world. That is, it results in a “modal collapse.” It is claimed that if God were absolutely simple, then God necessarily, and not freely, created this world, and that in fact this world is the only world God could have created, down to every last detail of the free acts of creatures within it. Such an argument, if successful, would be rightly seen as a serious problem for the doctrine of Divine simplic-
ity (DDS), for it entails the denial of all free choice whatsoever to both God and human creatures, at least on a libertarian concept of free choice. But even if compatibilism is true, it should be clear that a modal collapse is a wholly unwelcome commitment and a reductio against DDS, for at least some facts or states of affairs are manifestly contingent.

In response to this argument from modal collapse, many defenders of DDS have seemingly conceded its validity and considered ways of blocking the conclusion by denying or qualifying some of the commitments of DDS (cf. Stump and Kretzmann 1985, O’Connor 1999, Grant 2004). I think some of these solutions to the alleged inconsistency between Divine simplicity and the existence of real contingency in the world are promising. But the refutation of the argument from modal collapse needn’t be nearly so complicated. In this paper, I will examine one very common form of this argument from modal collapse and show that it is invalid on its face, and famously so. So the defenders of DDS have been too quick in conceding the force of the argument from modal collapse. Instead of there being a burden on the defenders of DDS to show that some premise in the argument from modal collapse is false, there is rather a burden on those who pose such an argument to show that there is some version of it which is demonstrably valid.

After pointing out the invalidity of this form of the argument from modal collapse, I will examine three possible fixes to the argument that might be pursued, and show that none are successful in establishing any difficulty for DDS.

2 The Argument from Modal Collapse

Substantially similar versions of the argument from modal collapse appear in Moreland and Craig (2003: 525), Mullins (2013), Leftow (2015), and Mullins (2016: 137–143). Here is one recent version of the argument from Leftow (he doesn’t endorse the argument):

On DDS, nothing in God is really distinct from anything else in Him. If so,
then everything wholly within God—everything intrinsic to God—is identical with everything else in God. Suppose, then, that God's intentions are wholly within God. If they are, it follows that they are all identical: God has just one intention. Further, God's intention = His essence. God has His essence necessarily. So it seems to follow that He has His actual intention necessarily. But then it seems that He necessarily wills just what He does: that He could not have willed otherwise. (Lef/ow 2015: 48)

This bears a very close resemblance to the also recent version of the argument from R.T. Mullins:

Does divine simplicity entail a modal collapse? Yes. There are multiple ways to set up the modal collapse argument, and elsewhere I have defended several ways to do this. Here, I shall articulate two ways. The simplest way is as follows. On divine simplicity God's essence is identical to His existence. Also, God's one simple act is identical to His essence/existence. God's act of creation is identical to this one simple act, and so identical to God's essence/existence. God exists of absolute necessity. So His act of creation is of absolute necessity since it is identical to His essence/existence. (Mullins 2016: 138)

For the sake of concreteness and convenience, and because Mullins' is the simplest and most direct statement of the argument of which I am aware (indeed, so simple and direct that I won’t bother to paraphrase or explicate it here), I will work with his version. But it should be clear that my criticism will apply equally to any reasonable formalization of the argument as it has been given elsewhere by other authors, including all those I mention above.

At first glance, the argument seems quite conclusive, apparently relying only on claims about the identity of God with His intrinsic attributes and the necessity of God's existence. And since we can construe God's act of creation as specifically as we might like, allowing

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4This is not the only argument against Divine simplicity in Mullins (2016), but he claims it as the “simplest way” and I am concerned only with this simplest argument here.
“act of creation” to denote the act which creates our world down to every last apparently contingent detail, the argument seems to establish not only the necessity of creation, but of this creation, such that every fact about our world is necessitated.

Cutting Mullins’ argument down to its essential core (by removing the intermediate identities he uses to establish the identity of God with God’s act of creation), we can state it thus:

1. Necessarily, God exists.
2. God is identical to God’s act of creation.
3. Necessarily, God’s act of creation exists.

Symbolically formalized, the argument can be put like so:

1. $\Box \exists x (x = G)$
2. $G = C$
3. $\Box \exists x (x = C)$

If this argument is successful, it is indeed fatal to DDS. As Leftow puts it, “Modal Spinozism thus looms: absolutely everything is absolutely necessary.” (Leftow 2015: 48) Such a doctrine is patently false, and so if DDS entails it, DDS is likewise patently false.

The argument could equally well be put in terms of Divine knowledge, rather than Divine will, substituting “God’s knowledge of the world” for “God’s act of creation.” Nothing in my argument turns on whether the argument is stated in terms of creation or knowledge. Also, sometimes the argument from modal collapse is phrased in terms of what is essential to God (His act of creation, His volition, or His knowledge, as the case may be), rather than in terms of what is identical to Him, as here. But since these claims of essentiality themselves cannot be proven from DDS without first identifying the intrinsic feature in question with God’s essence, and therefore with God, such arguments are parasitic on this one.

This is not in fact the full argument from modal collapse. An additional step is needed to get from (3) to the necessary existence of creation, and one way of attempting to repair the argument will implicate that step, which will be discussed below.

I will prescind here from consideration of the issues that arise when attempting to construe claims about God and His Nature in standard first-order logic. The fallacy in this argument remains even if first-order logic is wholly adequate to the task of analyzing claims like these at hand.

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Footnotes:

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3 Invalid Substitution into Modal Contexts

Fortunately for the proponent of DDS, the argument from modal collapse is facially invalid, and indeed commits a fallacy that has been well-known since at least Quine (1953, ch. 8). It substitutes “God’s act of creation” for “God” into a modal context (within the scope of a necessity operator, to be exact), but as Quine teaches us, 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. To use Quine’s own well-known example, while it is necessarily true that 8 is greater than 7, and it is true that the number of planets = 8, it is false that the number of planets is necessarily greater than 7. So this argument is invalid:

4. □(8 > 7)
5. Number of the planets = 8
6. □(Number of the planets > 7)

But note that this is precisely the same inference as that in the argument from modal collapse! I’ll give another example to which Christian opponents of DDS ought to be very sympathetic:

7. Necessarily, God exists.
8. God is identical to the Creator.
9. Necessarily, the Creator exists.

The symbolization and identity in form of this argument with the argument from modal collapse ought to be evident. The first two premises, (7) and (8), are emphatic and undeniable doctrines of Christianity (and both other Abrahamic religions), but (9) is just the same absurd conclusion reached by the argument from modal collapse. This shows not only that

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4 The number “9” has been changed to “8” to reflect the application of the 2006 definition of “planet” by the International Astronomical Union.
5 Here’s a more pedestrian example that employs existential claims:
the argument from modal collapse is invalid, but that the argument is one which confronts every theist who believes that God exists necessarily and is the Creator. So the argument from modal collapse, if valid, would not simply be a valid argument against DDS; it would be a valid argument against every Abrahamic religion. Surely this is not what those who take the argument from modal collapse intend!

4 Attempts to Repair

4.1 Using a Necessary Identity Statement

So what went wrong? The problem is with (2). “God is identical to His act of creation” may be true, but (3) will not follow unless it is necessarily true. So the following argument is valid:

1. \( \square \exists x (x = G) \)

2*. \( \square (G = C) \)

3. \( \square \exists x (x = C) \)

While this argument is valid, it is entirely open to the proponent of DDS simply to reject (2*) without any injury to DDS. DDS is directly committed only to (2), that is, to the identity of God and His act of creation. It is not directly committed to (2*). So simply substituting (2*) for (2) is not itself sufficient to make the argument from modal collapse both valid and dialectically well-situated.

4.2 Rigid Designation

But maybe the opponent of DDS can establish (2*), rather than claiming it as a fundamental premise. The most obvious way of doing this is to claim that DDS is committed indirectly

11. *Pride and Prejudice* is identical to Jane Austen’s second novel.

Of course, believers in abstract artifacts will deny (10), but the point is that (12) doesn’t follow from (10) and (11), even if they are true.
to (2*) in virtue of its commitment to (2), since (2) entails (2*). Or so the story goes. But of course, as Kripke (1980) taught us long ago, true identity statements in which one side of the identity sign is flanked by a rigid designator are necessarily true iff the other side is flanked by a rigid designator as well. So, to show that (2) entails (2*) (and thereby show that DDS entails (2*)), one could claim that “God’s act of creation” is a rigid designator, designating God in every possible world where God exists, which of course is every possible world simpliciter. “God” is certainly a rigid designator, and so if “God’s act of creation” is a rigid designator, the identity statement “God is identical to His act of creation,” if true at all, would have to be necessarily true. And since DDS does entail that (2) is true, it would therefore entail that it is necessarily true, thereby establishing (2*)

But this approach rather overtly begs the question. If “God’s act of creation” designates God in every possible world, this is just to say that God creates in every possible world (and, again, depending on the specificity of one’s construal of the term “God’s act of creation,” creates this world down to every last fact), which is precisely the conclusion that the argument from modal collapse is intended to prove. The claim that “God’s act of creation” is a rigid designator is logically equivalent to the conclusion of the argument from modal collapse (namely that God creates in every possible world), and so reliance upon such a claim in the argument is question-begging.

Here, the opponent of DDS may object: if “God’s act of creation” designates God at all, it must do so in virtue of something intrinsic to God, for acts are intrinsic to their actors. And since God is necessarily how He is intrinsically, if it designates God in virtue of His intrinsic act, it must do so in every possible world, and therefore designate God rigidly.

But this isn’t the case. While God’s act is indeed intrinsic (and therefore identical) to Him, “God’s act of creation” designates that act, not how it is in itself, but by way of its contingent effects. That is, whether “God’s act of creation” designates God’s act depends on

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10 We must also remember, as Kripke (1980: 3) says, that the necessity that arises in identity statements is necessity of the statement, and not of the identity of the designated object itself, since this is of course always necessary. But since it is the words “God’s act of creation” that are doing all the work in the argument from modal collapse, it is the necessity of the statement with which we are concerned.
the existence of a creation which is contingent, and so the designation is not rigid. And since
the designation is not rigid, the identity statement is not necessary, as it must be in order to
validate the argument from modal collapse. This is parallel to the way in which “the Creator”
designates God, not how He is in Himself, but rather by way of the contingent effects of
His act. But as I pointed out above, opponents of DDS will not wish to infer from God’s
necessary existence and His designation by “the Creator” that He creates in every possible
world. So neither should they infer from God’s necessary existence and His designation by
“God’s act of creation” that He creates in every possible world.

4.3 The De Re Reading

Everything we’ve said of the argument from modal collapse so far has presupposed a de dicto
reading of “God” and “God’s act of creation.” One last way of saving the argument from
modal collapse is to read “God” and “God’s act of creation” in the argument de re. This will
succeed with the abbreviated form of the argument we’ve been scrutinizing thus far. That is,
this will be sound when “God” and “God’s act of creation” are read de re:

1. Necessarily, God exists.

2. God is identical to God’s act of creation.

3. Necessarily, God’s act of creation exists.

But this is not the complete argument from modal collapse. The complete argument will
look something like this:

1. Necessarily, God exists.

2. God is identical to God’s act of creation.

3. Necessarily, God’s act of creation exists.

4. Necessarily, if God’s act of creation exists, then creation exists.
5. Therefore, necessarily, creation exists.

But now the problem is evident: while reading “God” and “God's act of creation” in this argument \textit{de re} will render the subargument from (1) and (2) to (3) sound, it will render (4) false. That is, the necessary existence of God's act of creation necessarily implies the necessary existence of this creation only if one reads “God's act of creation” \textit{de dicto}. To see this, compare the following argument:

13. Necessarily, the number of the planets exists.

14. Necessarily, if the number of the planets exists, then the planets exist.

15. Therefore, necessarily, the planets exist.

This is valid. And if “the number of the planets” is read \textit{de re}, then (13) is true, because necessarily, 8 exists. But (14) is false when “the number of the planets” is read \textit{de re}, because the necessary existence of 8 does not necessarily imply the necessary existence of any planets. It is true only when “the number of the planets” is read \textit{de dicto}.

So, reading the argument from modal collapse \textit{de re} repairs the modal fallacy in the subargument from (1) and (2) to (3) only at the price of the soundness of the full argument from modal collapse. Therefore, the full argument from modal collapse is unsound whether one reads “God” and “God's act of creation” \textit{de re} or \textit{de dicto}.

5 Conclusion

The doctrine of Divine simplicity is accused of entailing a modal collapse, but a common argument in the literature used to try to demonstrate this entailment, as I’ve now shown, is not simply unsound but invalid. This is important because, up to now, this argument has been tacitly assumed to be valid, and this assumption shifted the dialectical burden to defenders of DDS to show that one or more of the premises are false. In fact, the burden remains with opponents of DDS to give an argument from modal collapse that can be rigorously shown
to be valid and which does not beg the question. This is also one more exhibit in a familiar stockpile of evidence showing the dangers of paraphrasing or outlining arguments without strictly formalizing them.

Of course, this falls short of completely vindicating DDS. There are other arguments that can still be pressed against DDS. But until a valid version that doesn’t beg the question is presented, the argument from modal collapse is not among them.
References


