

Medieval Theories of Divine Simplicity and Distinction*

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Divine simplicity is a disputed topic today. Many contemporary philosophers and theologians deny that God is simple. It is not entirely obvious how the various divine attributes such as wisdom and love could be one and simple in God when wisdom and love are not identical. However, if God is not simple but instead has some sort of composition, then his priority seems to be in jeopardy because his essential parts would be prior to him.¹ Despite the difficulties and questions raised by a theory of divine simplicity, there is universal agreement among the Scholastics that God

* This article is dedicated in memory of my *doktorvater*, Timothy B. Noone (1957–2025), in gratitude for his friendship and care for the least of his students. *Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei. Requiescat in pace. Amen.*

¹ For arguments against divine simplicity, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2017), esp. 517–36. For replies to these arguments and defenses of divine simplicity, see Lawrence Dewan, “Saint Thomas, Alvin Plantinga, and the Divine Simplicity,” *Modern Schoolman* 66, no. 2 (1989): 141–51; Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas on Being, Goodness, and Divine Simplicity,” in *Die Logik Des Transzendentalen*, vol. 30 in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia*, ed. Martin Pickavé (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 212–25; James Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons, eds., *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (New York: Routledge, 2023), especially the chapters by Alexander R. Pruss, Daniel De Haan, and Gregory T. Doolan.

is supremely and entirely simple. They readily acknowledge that divine simplicity is not attributed to God explicitly in the Bible, but they insist that it is entailed both by the scriptural logic and by philosophical argumentation. We would look in vain for a scriptural passage that proclaims, “the Lord, your God, is simple,” yet, as Henry of Ghent notes, “all questions concerning the simplicity of God pertain to his unity.”²

Simplicity provides a refinement of our understanding of divine unity, because there are several ways that a thing can be one. Something can be one from composition, as man is one from body and soul, or one without composition. Simplicity is the absence of composition. If God were a composite unity rather than a simple unity, then he could not be the one first principle from whom all creatures have their being.³

Simplicity is one of the properties of God, where “property” is understood in the sense of *proprium*, something unique to God. God alone is supremely simple. Authors think this declaration follows from the biblical declaration “the Lord, your God, is one,”⁴ but it “is also certain in itself and from the testimony of creatures.”⁵ All creatures, regardless of how simple they may be (for clearly some creatures are simpler than others), have a twofold manner of composition: “one in which something is composed from other things [ex aliis]. Another in which something is composed with other things [cum aliis].”⁶ Both types of composition must be denied of

² Henry of Ghent, *Summa quaestionum ordinariam*, a. 28, q. 1: “Hic circa simplicitatem Dei in principio intelligendum est quod omnes quaestiones de dei simplicitate pertinent ad eius unitatem” (Paris, 1520, vol. 1, fol. 165rN;). Cf. a few lines below on the same page: “Omne quod simplex est unum est. Non autem omne quod unum est simplex est” — “Everything that is simple is one. But not everything that is one is simple” (*Summa*, a. 28, q. 1 [Paris ed., 1:165rN]). Please note three matters: (1) unless otherwise attributed, translations are my own; (2) works with fol. pages marked as such in their first citation will then be cited in the usual manner, including for multi-volume works [volume:page], but without fol. pages labeled as such, as has been done for the second quotation here); (3) unless otherwise identified, bracketed numbers appended to page numbers in primary-language editions are line numbers.

³ See Durandus of Saint-Pourçain, *In I Sent.* (C [=version 3, done 1317–1327]), d. 8, p. 2, q. 1 (*Petri Lombardi Sententias Theologicas Commentariorum libri IIII*, vol. I [Venice: Guerraea, 1571], 380[19]–81[26]). Note: all further citations of Durandus’s commentary on the *Sentences* will be to this third version (see note 8 below for setting). Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, sc 2 (Lethielleux ed. (1929), 1:218–19).

⁴ Deut. 6:4, and Mark 12:29.

⁵ Bonaventure, *De mysterio Trinitatis*, q. 2, a. 1 (*Opera omnia*, Quaracchi ed. [1891], 5:61a).

⁶ Henry, *Summa*, a. 28, prol.: “unus quo aliquid compositum ex aliis. Alius quo aliquid compositum cum alio” (Paris ed., 1:165rK). Cf. Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 2, a.

God. He must have neither internal composition (*ex aliis*) nor external composition (*cum aliis*). For the most part, the Scholastics use “simple” as a general term that is opposed to both types of composition, although at times they will use “simple” to deny internal composition in God, and “one” to deny external composition.⁷

Despite unanimously affirming that God is entirely and supremely simple, Scholastic authors differ greatly about how to understand this simplicity, especially when they consider the multiplicity of divine persons and the multiplicity of divine attributes. I will argue that the differences we find among authors are rooted in different understandings of distinction. Earlier Scholastic authors, who for the most part write between ca. 1250 and ca. 1290, tend to use the same sorts of arguments for divine simplicity, and they tend to view the divine attributes as distinct according to reason. St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, Richard of Mediavilla, and Durandus of St. Pourçain fall into this camp.⁸ Blessed John Duns Scotus’s thought, ca. 1294–1308, is the second period. Scotus employs some of the same arguments for divine simplicity, but he moves toward arguments based on God’s infinity. He rejects the account of the

2, ad 12 (Quaracchi ed., 5:67a), and Durandus, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, q. 1 (Venice ed., 1:380[16–18]). This distinction is taken from Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.7.8 (*Patrologia Latina* [PL], 4:929), which is quoted in Peter Lombard, *Sent.* I, d. 8, c. 4, n. 85 (ed. Ignatius Brady [Rome: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1971], 1:62).

⁷ See, e.g., Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, qq. 2–3 (Quaracchi ed., 5:59–78). Bonaventure later puts aside this distinction; see *Breviloquium* I, chap. 6: “Nam unum nominat ens ut connumerabile, et hoc habet per indivisionem sui in se” — “For ‘one’ names being as enumerable, and it has this through the indivision of itself in itself” (Quaracchi ed., 5:215a).

⁸ Durandus is a strange character in this list for two reasons. First, he does not begin writing until at least 1303, a little more than ten years after the period in question ends. Second, his metaphysical worldview is nominalist, or in more contemporary terminology, conceptualist, and these metaphysical commitments drew strong criticism from his fellow Dominicans. Yet, because of the controversy surrounding his commentary on the *Sentences*, he was forced to write a second commentary, and then he elected to write a third commentary after he received the doctorate in theology from the University of Paris. In the third commentary, we find a mix of arguments that range from the strictly Thomist to those unique to Durandus. On divine simplicity, he seems to have been content with the more Thomist arguments. For an introduction to his thought, see Russel L. Friedman, “Durandus of St. Pourçain,” in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 249–53; James A. Weisheipl, “Durandus of Saint-Pourçain,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); Josef Koch, *Durandus de S. Porciano o.p.: Forschungen zum Streit um Thomas von Aquin Zu Beginn des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1927).

divine attributes as distinct according to reason in favor of his formal distinction. Finally, we find the theory of William of Ockham, ca. 1317–1319, who employs none of the same arguments as earlier thinkers and argues that the only distinction in the divine attributes is in our mental concepts of them. Since Ockham thinks that unity and intelligibility are in tension, his theory of distinctions will not allow for a plurality of divine attributes to be discovered within the divine essence itself.

This article will have three parts. First, I will examine the arguments that God is entirely (*omnino*) or supremely (*summe*) simple from the earlier thinkers and Scotus. These will be grouped together because there is overlap in the arguments they endorse. Second, I will briefly examine some of their arguments for the compatibility of distinctions within God and divine simplicity. In this middle section, the difference between the earlier thinkers' use of a distinction of reason and Scotus's use of the formal distinction will become evident. Third, Ockham's theory of divine simplicity and its account of a multitude of divine attributes will be examined. Ockham's theory is treated separately because it is far more distinct than the other theories.

Arguments for Divine Simplicity Before Ockham

As far as I can tell, the earlier authors and Scotus deploy eleven different arguments for the claim that God is supremely and entirely simple. Of these eleven arguments, two argue for divine simplicity by process of elimination (which Richard of Mediavilla calls an induction), and the rest argue for simplicity directly by deductive arguments. I will treat the inductive arguments first.

Inductive Arguments for Divine Simplicity

Both inductive arguments for divine simplicity have in common the principle that, "if God cannot be shown to be composite (or lacks every possible composition), then he must be simple." They both then examine and reject the possibility that God is subject to internal or external composition.

The first and more common inductive argument is found in Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, Richard of Mediavilla, and John Duns Scotus. As Thomas has it, God is not a body (and so lacks quantitative parts), and he lacks all other types of composition (form and matter, nature and supposit, essence and existence [*esse*], genus and difference, and subject and

accidents), so his essence is entirely simple.⁹ Moreover, God cannot enter into composition with things such that he be the soul of the world, the formal principle of all things, or prime matter. Since God is the first efficient cause of things, he must be distinct from all things, because efficient causes are numerically distinct from their effects, and a first cause cannot be composite. If a first cause were composite, then we should have to look for the cause of its composition, which would mean that our alleged first cause is not actually first.¹⁰ Henry concurs with this line of reasoning, but he treats the types of composition in a slightly different order and adds the composition of act and potency as its own question.¹¹

Richard also provides a similar process of elimination in a paragraph that includes a short rationale for denying each type of composition. God is the highest being (*summe ens*), but each type of composition is incompatible with the *summe ens*. Therefore, God is supremely simple. Often, his reason God cannot have a particular sort of composition is that nothing with such a composition supremely exists. These claims typically require more argumentation than Richard supplies *in loco* to be truly conclusive, but anyone at all familiar with philosophy in the Aristotelian tradition should readily recognize (and be able to supply an argument for) why, for example, no body supremely exists.¹²

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 3, aa. 1–6 (Leonine ed., 4:35–46). Thomas sums up this argument at the beginning of his response to a. 7 (Leonine ed., 4:46b–47a).

¹⁰ Thomas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 8 (Leonine ed., 4:48).

¹¹ Henry, *Summa*, aa. 28–29 (Paris ed., 1:164vI–178rO). Henry treats internal composition in this order: God is not composed of quantitative parts, or matter and form, or genus and difference, or nature and suppositum, or essence and existence, or potency and act. He greatly expands the types of external composition, arguing that God could not come into composition with another as form with matter (or vice versa), as an accident with a subject (or vice versa), as a mover with the mobile, as an end with the orderable, or as a unity with another one. It is only after denying all of these that Henry is willing to declare that God lacks every mode of composition. Although Thomas Aquinas does not explicitly argue that God lacks the distinction of act and potency in his question on divine simplicity in the *ST*, it is clear that he thinks God lacks the distinction and that being pure act is a condition for divine simplicity. From the way he argues in *ST* I, q. 3, a. 1, it seems that he thinks he already proved that God does not have a distinction between act and potency in q. 2, a. 3. The first way seems the best candidate for establishing the distinction, but Aquinas does not make an explicit determination.

¹² Richard, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, a. 3, q. 1 (*Sacratissimi Theologi Ricardi de Mediavilla ordinis Seraphici minorum Conventualium in Primum Sententiarum quaestiones persubtilissime* [Venice, 1507–1509], 31rb–va). This passage appears almost verbatim in q. 1 of the *Quaestiones variae* attributed to Henry of Ghent. In fact, the entire response of both questions is so close that it is obvious that one author has copied the other.

Scotus offers inductive arguments in a variety of texts. Each of the arguments is in three parts. (1) God is not a composition of essential parts. (2) He is not composed of quantitative parts. (3) He is not composed of accident to subject. In the first part, he argues that God cannot be composed of matter and form. In the second, he argues that God could not be composed of quantitative parts because then he would be material. In the third, he argues that, because God neither is material nor has quantity, he is not capable of receiving material accidents. He is capable of receiving only what agrees with spiritual beings, namely, intellection, volition, and what corresponds to them. But these qualities are not accidental to God, but are rather his substance. Thus, God is not composed of subject and accident.¹³

We should note that, in Scotus's presentation, most of the types of composition have fallen off. Scotus does not find it necessary to argue against more types of composition than form and matter, quantitative parts, and subject and accident. The compositions of nature and suppositum, essence and existence, genus and difference, and act and potency are not included. So, while the same general structure of the argument remains the same—God is not composed from others or with others—the threshold for completeness evolves from author to author.

The second type of inductive argument appears in Bonaventure, Richard, one of the *Quaestiones variae* ascribed to Henry of Ghent, and Durandus of Saint Pourçain.¹⁴ It argues that, since God is composed neither from nor of other things and nothing can enter into composition with him, he is supremely simple. They argue for the three aspects of the proposition in a variety of ways. Some of these ways overlap with deductive arguments for divine simplicity, but it is worth recounting them here to show the development of the inductive argument. Bonaventure claims that the aforementioned compositions are ruled out because God is first (and so could not have essential parts prior to him), most perfect (and so will not come to constitute a third thing in combination with others), and

¹³ Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, q. 8, p. 1, q. 1, nos. 5–14 (*Opera omnia*, Vatican ed. [1956], 4:154–59); *Lectura* I, d. 8, p. 1, qq. 1–2, nos. 8–23 (Vatican ed., 17:2–7); *De primo principio*, chap. 4, concl. 1 (*The De Primo Principio of John Duns Scotus: A Revised Text and a Translation*, ed. Evan Roche [St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1949], 72–74). In the *Lectura*, Scotus does not argue in favor of the position that God is not composed of subject and accident. Instead, he argues that one of Thomas's arguments and two of Henry's arguments are not conclusive.

¹⁴ Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1 (Quaracchi ed., 5:70b); Pseudo-Henry, *Quaest. var.*, q. 1 (*Henrici de Gandavo opera omnia*, vol. 38, ed. G. J. Etzkorn [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2008], 4[55]–6[102]; Richard, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 3, a. 1 (Venice ed., 1:31rb); Durandus, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, q. 1 (Venice ed., 1:380[16–18]).

last (and so lacks the possibility of composition because other things are ordered to him as to a restful end).¹⁵

Richard argues against the three types of composition using an argument that eliminates all three possibilities at once. Any possibility of composition would be just that, a possibility. But the highest being has no possibility. So, any composition from others or with others, or even the mere possibility of another entering into composition with the highest being, must be ruled out.¹⁶

The question attributed to Henry makes three main arguments against the three types of composition, the third of which repeats almost verbatim Richard's argument against all three types of composition at the same time. In fact, it seems clear that its author has the text of Richard before him as he crafts his answer. His first argument specifically argues against the claim that God can be composed from others. Using Richard's reference to Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, he argues that God cannot be composed from other things because all such compositions depend on another for their being composed. God, the highest being, cannot depend on another for his existence, and so cannot be composed of others.¹⁷ His second argument amounts to a restatement of the first. The highest being cannot have a cause. Diverse things do not concur in the constitution of one thing unless some cause unifies them. Therefore, the highest being, God, cannot be composed from many things. The third argument is the one taken from Richard and is aimed at all three types of composition at the same time. Every composition includes possibility, but the highest being does not have any possibility. Therefore, the highest being is not composed at all.¹⁸

¹⁵ Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1 (Quaracchi ed., 5:70b).

¹⁶ Richard, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, a. 3, q. 1 (Venice ed., 1:31rb). After giving the general argument against all three, Richard goes through each of the three, showing why the argument applies specifically to it.

¹⁷ Pseudo-Henry, *Quaest. var.*, q. 1 (Leuven ed., 38:5[66–78]). The quotation from Augustine comes from *De libero arbitrio* 2.15 (PL, 32:1262).

¹⁸ Pseudo-Henry, *Quaest. var.*, q. 1 (Leuven ed., 38:5[79]–6[102]; alternate section numbers in brackets are those of the other Latin translation of two known). He cites Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 7.13.1039a4–6 (*Aristoteles Latinus*, vol. 25/3.2, ed. Gudrin Vuillemin-Diem [New York: Brill, 1995], 159[752–53]), although he says it is from book 5; Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, q. 2 (PL, 40:11); Avicenna, *Metaphysica* I, chap. 6 (*Avicenna Latinus: Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina*, 3 vols., ed. S. van Riet [Leuven: Peeters; Leiden: Brill, 1977–1980], 1:43[18–20]); IV, chap. 2 (1:212[43]); VI, chap. 3 (2:319[12]). Durandus makes use of the same three arguments. Against the possibility of God being composed from others, he argues that God is the first being, and has no cause. Against the possibility of God entering into composition with others or others with him, he argues that God is pure act, and so does not have the requisite possibility

Deductive Arguments for Divine Simplicity

In addition to these two inductive arguments that God is not complex, the Scholastics made nine deductive arguments for divine simplicity. Since simplicity is a negation of composition, all the arguments focus on the incompatibility of composition in God with some already known attribute of God, although some of the authors choose to emphasize the negative aspect of simplicity more than others. The first three arguments are primarily neo-Platonic, in that they associate a priority in being with greater simplicity. They are also Aristotelian because, as we will see below, they rely on the pure actuality of the highest being. The fourth argument is based on God's being independent because he does not depend on another and is uncaused. The fifth argument is patently Aristotelian in virtue of making explicit use of the principle that God is pure act, and so cannot have any potentiality. The sixth and seventh arguments appear only in Bonaventure and are based on God's perfection and immutability. The last two deductive arguments, the eighth and ninth, which are based on necessary being (*necesse-esse*) and infinity, are important because they are the only two arguments that Scotus uses as direct arguments in favor of divine simplicity.¹⁹ Scotus appears to have no use for the other arguments.²⁰

The first deductive argument is from priority. Everything that is first is simplest because to the extent that something is prior, it is simpler. God is the first in the genus of beings in that nothing is, nor can be, nor can be thought to be, prior to him. Therefore, God is the simplest, and supremely simple. The major premise is true because every composite is posterior to its components, and the simple is prior to the composite. Thus, Bonaventure adds, the predicate of the major premise is contained in its subject and so is self-evident.²¹

to allow for any composition to ever occur. His perfection rules out any composition. Despite these similarities, Durandus's clearly wrote his own arguments; see *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, q. 1 (Venice ed., 1:380[17]–82[74]).

¹⁹ With the exception of the last two arguments, the order of these arguments is somewhat arbitrary. No priority of importance should be given to any of the arguments based on this list. The eighth and ninth arguments are treated last because they are the only ones that Scotus uses, although they are not exclusive to him.

²⁰ Durandus will still use some of the earlier arguments in his third *In I Sent.*, but the circumstances surrounding his second and third commentary on the *Sentences* make it unclear how much he is endorsing a position or merely showing a somewhat coerced deference to tradition.

²¹ Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 3 (Quaracchi ed., 5:68a). Cf. Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 1, fm. 1 (Quaracchi ed., 1:165a); *Breviloq.* I, 1, chap. 6 (Quaracchi ed., 5:215a); Thomas, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, sc 1 (Lethielleux ed., 1:218);

The second argument is based on God's nobility. The first principle of being (*essendi*) has being (*esse*) in the noblest way, since something is always nobler in the cause than in the effect. But the noblest way of having *esse* is by something completely being its *esse*. Therefore, God is his *esse*. But nothing composed is completely its *esse* because its *esse* follows from its components, which are not its *esse*. Therefore, God is not composed.²²

The third deductive argument is based on God's power. The simpler something is, the more power it possesses, and vice versa, because "united power can do more than multiplied power."²³ But God is infinite and immense power. Therefore, he is infinitely simple. Therefore, God is supremely simple.²⁴

The fourth argument is based on divine independence, which is to say

ST I, q. 3, a. 7, corp., arg. 2 (Leonine ed., 4:48). Durandus's argument from priority is slightly different in *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, q. 1: "Primum ens est primum unum; set Deus est primum ens; ergo est primum unum; set unum compositione non potest esse primum unum; ergo Deus non est unum compositione, set simplicitate. Quod autem primum unum non sit unum compositione, patet, quia sicut se habet ad entitatem, sic se habet unitas ad unitatem; set entitas composite supponit entitatem partium; ergo unitas eius supponit unitatem cuiuslibet partis"—"The first being is the first one. But God is the first being. Therefore, he is the first one. But a one by composition cannot be the first one. Therefore, he is not one by composition but by simplicity. But that the first one is not one by composition is evident because it is related to being in the same way unity is related to unity; but being by composition supposes the being of parts; therefore its unity supposes a unity of some parts or other" (Venice ed., 1:380[20]–81[26]). A similar argument is found in Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 10 (Quaracchi ed., 5:69a).

²² Thomas, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, sc 2 and sc 3 (Lethielleux ed., 1:218–19); Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 1, fm. 3 (Quaracchi ed., 1:165a); *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 5 (Quaracchi ed., 5:68b). Bonaventure's approach to this argument does not focus as much on *esse* as Thomas's. Bonaventure argues instead that the noblest being must have all the conditions of nobility and simplicity is a condition of nobility.

²³ *Liber de causis*, prop. 9(10), no. 94: "Et in primis intelligentiis est virtus magna quoniam sunt vehementioris unitatis quam intelligentiae secundae inferiores; et in intelligentiis secundis inferioribus sunt virtutes debiles, quoniam sunt minoris unitatis et plures multiplicatis"—"And there is great power in the first intelligences because they are more strongly united than the second, inferior intelligences. And there are weak powers in the second, inferior intelligences because they are of lesser unity and of greater multiplicity" (from the critical edition by Adriaan Pattin, "Le *Liber de Causis*: Édition Établie à l'aide de 90 Manuscrits Avec Introduction et Notes," *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie* 28, no. 1 [1966]: 158[18]–59[23]; trans. mine). The Quaracchi editors of St. Bonaventure's *opera* cite prop. 7 as the source of this principle, but the closest I can find is the claim that "unitas est dignior ea quam divisio" in prop. 6 (7), no. 70 (Pattin, "Le *Liber de Causis*," 151[99–100]).

²⁴ Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., fm. 4 (Quaracchi ed., 1:168); *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 6 (Quaracchi ed., 5:68b–69a).

that God possesses himself perfectly such that he does not depend upon another and is uncaused. This argument has two articulations, depending on whether an author wants to emphasize either God's lack of dependence or his being uncaused. In its first articulation, it is argued that everything that is whatever it has is simplest. But God is whatever he has. Therefore, he is simplest. Bonaventure proves the minor premise as follows: God has power, wisdom, and so on. Therefore, either he is his power or he is not. If he is, then *habemus propositum*. If he is not his power, since he has power, he has to possess it from another. Therefore, God is from another. But this is false. Therefore, God must be whatever he has.²⁵ In its second articulation, God is independent because he is uncaused. Every composite being has a cause, for things that are diverse in themselves cannot become some one thing except through some cause. But God does not have a cause. Therefore, he cannot be composite. Therefore, he must be simple.²⁶

The fifth argument, which is the most commonly used argument, is based on pure actuality. Every composition includes some manner of potency. But God is pure act and has no potency in him at all. Therefore, God cannot be a composite. Lacking all composition, God must be supremely simple.²⁷

²⁵ Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., fm. 2 (Quaracchi ed., 1:168a); *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 7 (Quaracchi ed., 5:69a); Thomas, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, sc 2 (Lethielleux ed., 1:218–19); Pseudo-Henry, *Quaestiones variae*, q. 1 (Leuven ed., 38:5[66–78]). In *ST I*, q. 3, a. 7 (Leonine ed., 4:47), Thomas argues to God's self-possession in a slightly different way.

²⁶ Thomas, *ST I*, q. 3, a. 7, corp., arg. 3 (Leonine ed., 4:47a); Pseudo-Henry, *Quaest. var.*, q. 1 (Leuven ed., 38:5[79–85]); Durandus, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, q. 1 (Venice ed., 1:381[27]–82[56]). See Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 2, ad 2, ad 3, ad 4 (Quaracchi ed., 1:169b): “Solus autem Deus est independens. Omnia autem alia sunt dependentia, sive comparatione ad principia, ex quibus sunt, sive unum principium componens complicitur ad aliud, sive esse dependens comparatione ad Deum sive ab ipso Deo. Nihil, autem, quod dependet, est sua dependentia: ideo nihil tale est summe simplex, quia omne simplicissimum est absolutissimum”—“Only God is independent. But all others are dependent either in comparison to principles from which they exist, or one composing principle is joined to the other, or a dependent being in comparison to God or from God himself. But nothing that depends is its very dependence. Therefore, no such thing is supremely simple because every most simple being is most absolute.”

²⁷ Thomas, *ST I*, q. 3, a. 7, corp., arg. 4 (Leonine ed., 4:47); Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 4 (Quaracchi ed., 5:71b–72a); Pseudo-Henry, *Quaest. var.*, q. 1 (Leuven ed., 38:5[87–102]); Richard, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, a. 3, q. 1 (Venice ed., 1:31rb–va); Durandus, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. 1 (Venice ed., 1:382[57–83]). Bonaventure offers an interesting derivation of divine simplicity in his *In I Sent.* that ties actuality to nobility, which in turn demands the supreme communication of the Blessed Trinity: “Quoniam ubi *summa* simplicitas intelligitur, oportet summan actualitatem intelligi, si summe *nobilis* est. Et ubi

As far as I can tell, the sixth and seventh arguments are unique to Bonaventure. The sixth argument is based on God's perfection. Every most perfect being is simplest. But divine being (*esse*) is most perfect. Therefore, it is most simple. The minor premise is clear because no condition is more consonant with divine being than perfection. The major premise is proved because what is perfect itself wholly and according to its whole self is more perfect than that which has something perfectible in itself. But every composite or thing capable of composition has something perfectible in itself. Therefore, it is impossible that something be supremely perfect unless it also be simplest. Therefore, God must be the simplest being.²⁸ The seventh argument is based on God's immutability. Every composite is mutable. Therefore, from the denial of the consequence, every immutable thing is simple, and everything simply immutable is simple in every way. But divine being (*esse*) is entirely immutable because the highest good cannot be changed into something better, equal, or worse. Therefore, divine being is the simplest.²⁹

The eighth argument for divine simplicity is the first deductive argument that Scotus deploys, although it is not unique to him. It seems like Scotus would be amenable to several of the prior arguments for divine simplicity, especially the argument based on God as pure act, yet he does not use any of them when he treats divine simplicity in his *Ordinatio* and *Lectura*. The eighth argument is based on God as necessary being (*necesse-esse*). If *necesse-esse* were composite, either its components would be *necesse-esse* formally or not. If not, then it would be possible being, and not *necesse-esse*. If yes, then it would not become one with the other part, because what is *per se ens* does not become one with another being.³⁰ Therefore, *necesse-esse* is not composite.

est summa actualitas, summa diffusio et communicatio debet poni; et ista non potest esse nisi in sempiterna poroductione rei omnino infinitae et aequalis in virtute; et hoc non potest esse in alietate essentiae: ergo non potest intelligi divina essentia simplicissima, nisi in tribus personis intelligatur tota esse, quarum una sit ab alia — "Because it is necessary that supreme actuality be understood, if it is supremely noble, where supreme simplicity is understood, and supreme diffusion and communication ought to be posited where there is supreme actuality, and this cannot be except in the sempiternal production of a thing that is entirely infinite and equal in virtue, and this cannot be except in a foreign essence, therefore, the divine essence cannot be understood to be most simple unless its whole being is understood in three persons, of which one is from another" (d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 1, ad 1 [Quaracchi ed., 1:166a]).

²⁸ Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 8 (Quaracchi ed., 5:69a).

²⁹ Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 9 (Quaracchi ed., 5:69a).

³⁰ Bonaventure, *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 1, fm. 4 (Quaracchi ed., 5:68b); Henry, *Summa*, a. 29,

The ninth and final deductive argument is based on infinity. It is unique to Scotus, and he offers two versions of the argument. The first version argues that everything that can enter into composition with another can be part of a whole. But every part is exceeded in perfection by the whole. But an infinite cannot be exceeded. Therefore, God, who is infinite, cannot enter into composition with another.³¹ Scotus argues in the second version that everything that can enter into composition with another lacks, in itself, that with which it can enter into composition. Therefore, if *A* (God) can be in composition with *B*, then *A* does not have *B* through identity. Therefore, *A* will not be infinite, because the composite has *A* and something else. But if it is not infinite, then it is not God. Therefore, if God can enter into composition with another, he will not be God.³²

The arguments above make it clear the unanimity of the claim that God is simple.³³ Not only is there only one God, but the one God is neither composed out of any parts nor enters into composition with any other being. We must conclude that God is simple because we find reason to exclude from him all possible compositions—we conclude that God is simple because he is *not* composed. Yet we are not constrained to this negative conclusion. We can argue from the eminence of God's existence as the highest being that he must be simple. The fact that the highest being is

q. 8 (Paris ed., 1:177vL); Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 8, p. 1, q. 1, no. 16 (Vatican ed., 4:160[2–14]); *Lect.* I, d. 8, p. 1, qq. 1–2 (Vatican ed., 17:8[8–17]).

³¹ Scotus, *Lect.* I, d. 8, p. 1, qq. 1–2, no. 26 (Vatican ed., 17:8[19–22]). The premise that an infinite cannot be exceeded for Scotus seems to need some qualification, since he holds that God knows an infinite number of possible creatures. That numerical infinity remains infinite for God but is nonetheless finite for him according to a certain proportion, since the infinite number of possible creatures does not exceed the divine intellect. Instead, everything that is in the divine intellect neither exceeds nor is exceeded by the divine intellect. It is really and truly infinite, but it is still bounded by the divine intellect (Scotus, *Rep. Paris.* I-A, d. 36, qq. 3–4, ad 2, no. 82; see the critical edition of q. 36 by Timothy B. Noone “Scotus on Divine Ideas: *Rep. Paris.* I-A, d. 36,” *Medioevo: rivista di storia della filosofia medievale* 24 [1998]: 359–453, at 452[line 28]–453[line 10]). So, it seems possible that, at least in this one instance, an infinite is exceeded by another infinite even though the “lesser” infinite is not rendered really and absolutely finite in itself or in God's mind as a result. For more on Scotus's argument that God knows an infinite number of things, see Carl A. Vater, *God's Knowledge of the World: Medieval Theories of Divine Ideas from Bonaventure to Ockham* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 183–92.

³² Scotus, *Lect.* I, d. 8, p. 1, qq. 1–2, no. 27 (Vatican ed., 17:8[23–28]). He offers a slightly extended version of this argument in *Ord.* I, d. 8, p. 1, q. 1, nos. 17–19 (Vatican ed., 4:160[15]–61[13]).

³³ Our examination of Ockham below will only strengthen this claim.

first, noblest, most powerful, independent and uncaused, pure act, perfect, immutable, necessary, and infinite forces us to admit that God simple.

Arguments for the Compatibility of Distinctions with Divine Simplicity

The continual Scholastic claim that God is supremely (*summe*) and entirely (*omnino*) simple immediately encounters three very serious objections: the Trinity, divine attributes, and divine knowledge. If God is, as all orthodox Christians declare him to be, triune, then the Scholastics must offer reasons to think that the divine simplicity is compatible with a plurality of persons. Again, God is both good and wise. But goodness and wisdom are not formally the same. Therefore, the divine attributes must be distinct from each other.³⁴ Since it is not apparent how distinct divine attributes are compatible with divine simplicity, reasons must be given for such a distinction. And if God is to know all things intimately, then the Scholastics must offer reasons to think that the divine simplicity is compatible with a plurality of things known.

Moreover, these three pluralities must be distinct from each other lest someone declare that there are as many divine persons in God as there are divine attributes or objects known by God. For the sake of space and since the difference in theories of distinction emerges most strongly in it, this section will focus on Bonaventure's and Scotus's arguments for the compatibility of the Trinity and divine attributes with divine simplicity.³⁵ Such an overview will allow us to see the contrast between Ockham's theory of divine simplicity and his predecessors.

Bonaventure argues that both a real and a rational distinction help us

³⁴ As we will see below, Ockham strongly objects to this argument. What is important at this point is that the distinction between goodness and wisdom seems to demand distinction in the simplicity of God.

³⁵ For an investigation into the unity of the divine essence and Trinity of divine persons, see, among others, Russell L. Friedman, *Intellectual Traditions at the Medieval University: The Use of Philosophical Psychology in Trinitarian Theology among the Franciscans and Dominicans, 1250–1350*, Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 108 (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, Theological Resources (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972); Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Juan Carlos Flores, "Henry of Ghent on the Trinity," in *A Companion to Henry of Ghent*, ed. Gordon A. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 135–50; Hester G. Gelber, "Logic and the Trinity: A Clash of Values in Scholastic Thought, 1300–1335" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1974).

understand the ways in which plurality is compatible with God's supreme simplicity. The divine persons differ by a real distinction because one person cannot be predicated of the others. The Father is not the Son. The divine attributes differ only by reason, only by our way of considering them.³⁶ Although each attribute connotes something different from the others such that they are not interchangeable in our understanding, all of them are identical in God. God's mercy is his infinity and vice versa.

Bonaventure specifies that a distinction of reason is "the least difference since it is in things connotated. For although each one is said of the other and the same can be said of both, yet the same thing is not connotated by both, nor are we given to understand the same thing by both."³⁷ In reality, the divine attributes are identical to each other, but our way of considering the attributes makes it necessary for us to distinguish them as if they were not identical.³⁸ The definitions that we have for, say, "goodness" or "wisdom" are different, and so to predicate goodness of God and to predicate wisdom of God does not seem like the same thing. The finitude of our minds makes it so that the words have different connotations and make it impossible for us to express all the divine attributes with just one word.³⁹

³⁶ Bonaventure, *Breviloq.* I, chap. 4 (Quaracchi ed., 5:213b). Bonaventure also identifies a third distinction which falls between a real and rational distinction, which is called an "attributinal" distinction. This sort of distinction allows us to distinguish between the persons and the essence. For although we can predicate the person of the essence and the essence of the person, yet we cannot predicate everything of the essence that we do of the person. The Son is the essence and the essence is the Son, but whereas the Son is distinguished and related, the essence is absolute and so not distinguished or referred. Like a rational distinction, one of the *relata* may be predicated of the other and the *relata* are ontologically one and inseparable. Still, like the real distinction, the distinction is not only in our understanding. It is also in the thing. See Sandra S. Edwards, "St. Bonaventure on Distinctions," *Franciscan Studies* 38, no. 1 (1978): 202–5.

³⁷ Bonaventure, *Breviloq.* I, chap. 4: "Tertia vero differentia [sc. secundum modum intelligendi] est minima quia est in connotatis. Licet enim unum de altero dicatur ad invicem, et idem possit dici de utrisque; non tamen idem connotatur utrobique, nec per idem intelligi datur utrumque" (Quaracchi ed., 5:213b).

³⁸ See Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 19, p. 1, dub. 3: "quamvis secundum rationem loquendi vel intelligendi a parte nostra magnitudo in divinis dicatur per modum quantitatis, et deitas per modum substantiae, tamen a parte rei nulla est omnino differentia"—"Although magnitude is said to be in the divine through the mode of quantity and deity through the mode of substance according to our way of speaking or understanding, nevertheless there is entirely no difference in reality" (Quaracchi ed., 1:351a). Cf. Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 13, a. 4 (Leonine ed., 4:144–45).

³⁹ Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 45, a. 2, q. 1: "Et quamvis unum sint, quia intellectus noster non potest infinitatem illius substantiae comprehendere nec per unum verbum exprimere; ideo multis modis intelligimus Deum et diversis nominibus exprimimus"—"And

The three divine persons are distinct according to a real distinction. Although we tend to think of real distinctions as including the separation of the distinct things, Bonaventure argues that not every real distinction has this requirement and that some kinds of real distinction are compatible with divine simplicity. Bonaventure makes three sets of distinction to help us understand real distinction of persons together with divine simplicity. First, he says that there are two types of diversity. The first type of diversity is diversity from addition, which is the diversity in absolute properties that are diverse in diverse things, as white in Peter and black in Paul. This sort of diversity posits composition and so is incompatible with simplicity.⁴⁰ The second type of diversity, however, comes from origin alone as when a person emanates from another. The persons differ, but this is not contradictory to simplicity, because it posits only an order and relation to the other, not a composition. Thus, it does not posit composition, but rather a distinction and differentiation. It is compatible with simplicity.⁴¹ The relations among the three persons make for a real distinction of persons because, as Sandra Edwards comments: "According to Bonaventure every real relation is irreflexive."⁴² The divine persons are really distinct insofar as the Father is related to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, and they are related to him and to each other. But the relation of the Father is not to himself but to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Second, as a corollary to the distinction among types of diversity, Bonaventure distinguishes two types of plurality. In the first type of plurality, there is more found in two than there is in one, as there is more goodness in two men than in one. This sort of plurality is contradictory to simplicity because it adds to the unity; it is a diversity from addition. In the second type of plurality, there is just as much in many as there is

although [the divine attributes] are one, because our intellect cannot comprehend nor express the infinity of that substance through one word, therefore, we understand God in many modes and we express him with diverse names" (Quaracchi ed., 1:804). Cf. Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 22, a. un., q. 2, ad 3 (Quaracchi ed., 1:394b); d. 19, p. 1, dub. 3 (Quaracchi ed., 1:351a); *De myst. Trin.*, q. 3, a. 2 (Quaracchi ed., 5:76).

⁴⁰ Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 1, ad 2 (Quaracchi ed., 1:166ab). Cf. *In III Sent.*, d. 3, p. 2, a. 2, q. 1, fm. 5: "Distinctio secundum oppositas qualitates praesupponit distinctionem secundum substantiam, quia oppositae qualitates non possunt esse in eodem et secundum idem"—"A distinction according to opposite qualities presupposes a distinction according to substance, because opposite qualities cannot exist in the same substance in the same mode" (Quaracchi ed., 3:85b).

⁴¹ Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 1, ad 2 (Quaracchi ed., 1:166ab). Cf. Thomas, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, ad 1 (Lethielleux ed., 1:219).

⁴² Edwards, "St. Bonaventure on Distinctions," 199.

in one, as there is just as much being, goodness, and power in one divine person as there is in many. This sort of plurality adds nothing to the unity, and so posits no composition. It is a plurality resulting from a diversity of origin. There is no increase of being, goodness, or power at the generation of the Son or spiration of the Holy Spirit. There is only a distinction in origin and relation.⁴³

Finally, Bonaventure distinguishes three ways that a property can be distinguished from another property: with respect to a subject, with respect to itself, or with respect to an object. A property differs from another property with respect to a subject because they are caused by diverse natures found within it. Thus, there is composition in the subject from a plurality. A property differs from another property with respect to itself as when musical and grammatical differ in Peter. Thus, there is a composition because the subject is subject (*subesse*) to a plurality. Finally, a property differs from a property with respect to an object because it posits the subject as compared to many things. This respect does not posit composition, but distinction, as when, for example, a point is the beginning of one line and the end of another. No composition is found in the point simply because it is the extreme of two different lines. It is one point in reality and two only according to reason—it is two insofar as it is considered as the beginning of one line and the end of the other. The divine properties, he says, are distinguished in this manner.⁴⁴

In these ways of understanding diversity, plurality, and distinction of properties, we see Bonaventure arguing that divine simplicity admits of distinctions because they do not add to the reality of the one. The distinctions of diversity and plurality allow us to understand how divine persons can be really distinguished from each other without adding to the divine essence or differing in being, goodness, or power.⁴⁵ The third distinction argues that the variety of divine attributes, such as goodness and wisdom, are really one, and differ only because of our way of considering them. We have to consider goodness as distinct from wisdom, and so we say that God

⁴³ Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 1, ad 3 (Quaracchi ed., 1:166b).

⁴⁴ Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, a. un., q. 1, ad 4 (Quaracchi ed., 1:166b). Cf. Thomas, *In I Sent.*, d. 2, a. 5 (Lethielleux ed., 1:74–76).

⁴⁵ The divine persons need to be really distinguished from each other because, as Thomas notes, to say that the persons are distinguished only by reason sounds like the Sabellian heresy (*In I Sent.*, d. 2, a. 5 [Lethielleux ed., 1:75]), which claimed that “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” are just three names that the one God takes up at different times. The one God wears, as it were, three different masks. In that case, God would not really be a Trinity.

has two different attributes. Yet they differ by reason alone, not because of any real difference in God.⁴⁶

Scotus agrees with Bonaventure's conclusion that the divine persons and the divine attributes do not derogate the divine simplicity. He seems open to St. Bonaventure's account of the distinction of divine persons, but he rejects the claim that the divine attributes are merely rationally distinct.⁴⁷ As a general rule, Scotus argues that a real distinction entails that the really related things are separable, at least in principle.⁴⁸ In the case of the divine persons, however, he argues that "the Son is really distinguished from the Father."⁴⁹ They are really distinct from each other as a relation, rather than the usual sense of being really distinct as difference.⁵⁰

When it comes to the divine attributes, a distinction according to reason is insufficient because it is too weak. There must be some legitimate foundation in God for the distinction of attributes. Thus, Scotus makes use of his formal distinction.⁵¹ The formal distinction falls between a real

⁴⁶ See Henry, *Quodlibet* V, q. 1 (*Quodlibeta Magistri Henrici Goethals a Gandavo Doctoris Solemnis* [Paris, 1518], fol. 150A–151E). See also Henry, *Summa*, a. 32, q. 4: "Ecce quod respectus in Deo distinguit per affirmationes et negationes, ita quod omnia divina attributa, sive affirmativa sive negativa, non nisi respectus significant" — "Behold that a respect in God distinguishes through affirmations and negations such that all the divine attributes, whether affirmative or negative, only signify a respect" (*Henrici de Gandavo opera omnia*, vol. 27, *Summa (Quaestiones ordinariae)*, art. xxxi–xxxiv, ed. R. Macken [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1991], 67[13–15]). Cf. Godfrey of Fontaines, *Quodlibet* VII, q. 1, in *Les Philosophes Belges*, vol. 2, ed. M. de Wulf and J. Joffmans (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de l'Université, 1914), 265–78.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Scotus, *Ord.* II, d. 2, p. 1, qq. 1–4, no. 401 (Vatican ed., 2:355[14–17]), where Scotus approves of Bonaventure's terminology of *differentia rationis*, provided we understand *ratio* as referring to the very quiddity of the thing which is an object of the intellect.

⁴⁸ Scotus, *Ord.* II, d. 2, p. 1, q. 2, nos. 92–94 (Vatican ed., 7:196[19]–98[3]).

⁴⁹ Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, qq. 1–4, no. 421: "Filius realiter distinguitur a Patre" (Vatican ed., 2:366).

⁵⁰ For an in-depth analysis of Scotus's account of the divine persons, see Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 127–241, esp. 154–55, for the real distinction of the divine persons; Cross, *Duns Scotus*, Great Medieval Thinkers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 61–71; Gelber, "Logic and the Trinity," 71–102.

⁵¹ The formal distinction plays a central role in Scotus's metaphysics. As Peter King points out, in addition to using it to explain the distinction between the divine persons and the divine essence, and the distinction between the divine attributes, he deploys it to explain the distinction between an individual's genus and specific *differentia*, an individual's essence and proper accidents, the faculties of the soul and the soul itself, and the uncontracted common nature and the individual *differentia* ("Scotus on Metaphysics," in

distinction and a distinction according to reason and shares something in common with both. A real distinction between things exists in reality (*ex natura rei*), but without any action of the intellect and it entails the separability of the two things. A distinction of reason exists because of an action of the intellect and is compatible with the identity of the things being distinguished. Thus, Peter and Paul are really distinct, but Paul and the author of Romans are only rationally distinct. A formal distinction, Scotus says, exists *ex natura rei* and yet is compatible with the identity of the thing.⁵² If we examine Paul, we discover his genus and difference: animal and rational. These two are identical, in Paul insofar as he is a man but rationality and animality are not formally the same. They would be the same formally, or have the same formality, if their definitions were identical or if the definition of one included the other. But animal and rational are not such, and so are distinct formalities. Thus, since Paul's animality and rationality have a legitimate foundation in him (that is, are *ex natura rei*) and are not separable from Paul, Scotus concludes that they are not formally identical.⁵³

In order to show that the formal distinction applies to the divine essence, Scotus makes a two-step argument. The first step concerns the mode of divine knowledge and shows that the divine attributes are *ex natura rei*, not a result of God's knowledge of himself. The second step concerns the

The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus, ed. Thomas Williams [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 22–25). See also, among others, Maurice J. Grajewski, *The Formal Distinction of Duns Scotus* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1944); Michael Joseph Jordan, "Duns Scotus on the Formal Distinction" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1984); Allan B. Wolter, *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 27–41; Stephen D. Dumont, "Duns Scotus's Parisian Question on the Formal Distinction," *Vivarium* 43, no. 1 (2005): 7–62; Guido J. Alt, "The Weaker and Stronger Senses of Scotus's Formal Distinction," in *Homo, Natura, Mundus: Human Beings and Their Relationships: Proceedings of the XIV International Congress of the S.I.E.P.M., July 24–28, 2017, Porto Alegre, Brazil*, ed. Roberto Hofmeister Pich, Alfredo Carlos Storck, and Alfredo Santiago Culleton, *Rencontres de Philosophie Médiévale* 22 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 781–92.

⁵² Guido J. Alt puts the matter more technically: "It seems that two different types of relations are comprehended under the Scotist expression 'formal distinction *ex natura rei*': (i) firstly, it means a *qualified distinction of attributes really identical with but formally distinct from the essence of the item* . . . (ii) secondly, it means also *the obtaining of formal non-identity of the attributes of the item among themselves*, in such a way that the transitivity of real identity among them fails" ("Weaker and Stronger Senses," 782; emphasis original).

⁵³ Scotus, *Lect.* I, d. 2, p. 2, qq. 1–4, no. 275 (Vatican ed., 16:216[11–24]).

formality, reality, or entity of the divine attributes.⁵⁴ Scotus begins the first step with the assumption that God's knowledge is perfect. Perfect knowledge is "of an object as the object is present in actual existence, and this in itself or in another eminently containing its whole entity."⁵⁵ Scotus calls this type of knowledge intuitive as opposed to abstractive.⁵⁶ Since intuitive knowledge grasps the object as it really is, it follows that whatever distinctions are grasped in intuitive knowledge are in the object as actually existing in it. That is, those distinctions are *ex natura rei*. So, if God grasps formally distinct objects about his essence, then his essence

⁵⁴ Scotus uses these terms interchangeably. For more on these terms, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ockham on Identity and Distinction," *Franciscan Studies* 36 (1976): 31–33; G. Menching, "Bemerkungen zu den scotistischen Neologismen am Beispiel der *formalitas*," in *L'elaboration du vocabulaire philosophique au moyen âge*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Carlos Steel (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 357–68.

⁵⁵ Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, qq. 1–4 (Vatican ed., 2:352[8–10]). Cf. d. 8, p. 1, q. 4, no. 187 (Vatican ed., 4:257[5–12]).

⁵⁶ In intuitive cognition, the thing is present in its existence, and in abstractive cognition, the knowing power abstracts from all existence. At the level of sense, Scotus argues that sensation is a form of intuitive cognition and imagination as a kind of abstractive cognition. At the level of intellect, our usual manner of understanding is abstractive, but he argues that intellectual intuitive cognition is possible for us both because the intellect as a higher power should be able to do what a lower power can do and because the beatific vision consists in intellectual intuitive cognition of the divine essence. Scotus further claims that, in abstractive intuition a cognitive species produces the movement of the cognitive power, but in intuitive cognition the object present in itself produces the movement of the cognitive power. The inference we should draw from this last point is that all the distinctions flowing from intuitive cognition are prior to our intellectual activity and found *ex natura rei*. They could not be mere distinctions of reason. Scotus makes the distinction between intuitive cognition and abstractive cognition at, among others, *Lect.* II, d. 3, p. 2, q. 2, nos. 285–90; *Ord.* I, d. 1, p. 1, q. 2, nos. 34–36 (Vatican ed., 2:23[2]–24[13]); II, d. 3, p. 2, q. 2, nos. 321–23 (Vatican ed., 7:553[6]–54[13]); d. 9, qq. 1–2, nos. 65, 98 (Vatican ed., 8:164–65, 183); *In VII met.*, q. 15, no. 18 (*B. Ioannis Duns Scoti opera philosophica* [OPh.], vol. 4, *Quaestiones super libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis, libri VII–IX* [St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1997], 299[18]–300[9]); *Collatio* 36, no. 11 (*Joannis Duns Scoti opera omnia, editio nova*, vol. 5 [Paris: Vivès, 1891], 301b); *De primo principio*, chap. 4, concl. 11 (Roche ed. [note 13 above], 148, 150). For contemporary discussions of the topic, see, among others, Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus's Theory of Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 43–63; Robert Pasnau, "Cognition," in Williams, *Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, 285–311; Stephen D. Dumont, "The Scientific Character of Theology and the Origin of Dun Scotus' Distinction between Intuitive and Abstractive Cognition," *Speculum* 64 (1989): 579–99; Allan B. Wolter, "Duns Scotus on Intuition, Memory, and Our Knowledge of Individuals," in *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus*, by Allan B. Wolter, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 98–122.

really will have such distinct formalities and those formalities will not be a result of act of the divine intellect.⁵⁷

Moving to the second step, Scotus argues that God does, in fact, intuit formalities. When God understands himself, he knows himself to be both wise and good. Thus, wisdom and goodness are found in him *ex natura rei*. The issue for Scotus is that “wisdom in a thing formally is not goodness in a thing.”⁵⁸ For although we might be tempted to think, as Bonaventure does, that, whereas wisdom and goodness are distinct for us in our finite existence and understanding, they are one and the same thing for God in his infinity, Scotus insists that the qualifications “finite” and “infinite” have no bearing on the character of the attributes. The formal character of wisdom remains constant regardless of the grade of existence in which we find it. As Richard Cross puts it, “a property had by God is the same as, or overlaps with, a creaturely property.”⁵⁹ Infinite wisdom is wisdom just as much as finite wisdom is wisdom. The formal character of wisdom is found in its essence and definition.⁶⁰ So, since the definition of goodness and the definition of wisdom are not identical to each other and one does not include the other, they are not formally identical.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 8, p. 1, q. 4, no. 187 (Vatican ed., 4:257[12–18]); d. 2, p. 2, qq. 1–4, no. 394 (Vatican ed., 2:352[10–19]).

⁵⁸ Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 8, p. 1, q. 4, no. 192 (Vatican ed., 4:261[3–5]).

⁵⁹ Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, 108.

⁶⁰ Note that in the background of this discussion is Scotus's acceptance of Avicenna's theory of essence. For Avicenna, an essence can exist in two ways and be considered in three ways. It can exist either in individuals or in a knower. In each case, the essence takes on certain characteristics that are not part of the essence itself. So, the essence of horse is singular in an individual horse and universal in a knower. The essence can be considered as existing in either of these two ways, or it can be considered in a third way, which is a consideration of the essence in itself. In this third way, nothing extraneous to the essence is included but only what falls into the definition of the thing. Scotus's formalities are clearly the absolute consideration of an essence wherein only what falls into the definition of the thing (if it is definable) is considered. See Avicenna, *Metaphysica* V, chap. 1 (Leuven ed. [note 18 above], 2:227–38).

⁶¹ Scotus, *Ord.* I, d. 8, p. 1, q. 4, no. 192–93 (Vatican ed., 4:261[6]–262[5]); Scotus, *Lect.* I, d. 8, p. 1, q. 4, nos. 175–76 (Vatican ed., 17:63[3–26]). See Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, 107–11. In *Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, qq. 1–4, no. 356 (Vatican ed., 2:356[16]–357[1]), Scotus includes that, for things to have formal identity, one must include the other in its formal, quidditative *ratio* and be *per se* in the first mode. The latter condition entails that the definition of the predicate be included in the subject. See Aristotle, *Posterior analytics* I, chap. 4. See also Alt, “Weaker and Stronger Senses,” 787: “Such definitional independency between properties which are inseparable from a particular nature is what Scotus means by saying that the concept of one feature does not belong *per se primo modo* to the concept of the other.”

Thus, the divine attributes cannot be distinct by reason alone but must be formally distinct.⁶²

Scotus's argument relies on the fact that we could not understand a distinction in the thing unless that distinction were somehow already there. To Bonaventure's example of a point, Scotus would readily admit that the point is only one, but he would deny that the difference between the point as end of one line and beginning of another is merely a difference of reason. There really is a difference in the point itself, because "to be the beginning of a line" and "to be the end of a line" are not formally the same. Thus, they must be more than rationally distinct. That distinction is present in the point itself and not merely imposed by the intellect. But we cannot say that they are really distinct either, since, for Scotus, things are really distinct only if they can be separated. These two facts about the point—namely, its being the end of one line and the beginning of another—cannot be separated, however, because then there would be two points, not one. As a result, the formal distinction, which falls between a rational distinction and a real distinction is involved.

Thus, there is a general agreement between Bonaventure and Scotus that there must be certain distinctions that do not derogate God's supreme simplicity because, otherwise, we could not account for certain divine attributes, such as wisdom and goodness. There is unanimity on the real distinction of the divine persons. However, their agreement is only at the most general level for the divine attributes, and they immediately divide into two camps: those who think the distinctions are merely rational, and those who think the distinction is formal.

Ockham on Divine Simplicity

William of Ockham is the fiercest Scholastic defender of divine simplicity as identical to divine unity. Divine simplicity is so crucial for him that he does not wait until the eighth distinction of his *Ordinatio* to treat it as most of the other authors do. Instead, it is the first thing he treats in the second distinction. He takes the claim that God is supremely (*summe*)

⁶² It has been questioned whether the propositions "*A* is not formally identical to *B*" and "*A* is formally distinct from *B*" are logically entailed. Scotus argues that, if we understand them properly, then the second proposition follows from the first. See Scotus, *Quaestio de formalitatibus*, trans. and ed. Kent Emery Jr. and Garrett R. Smith, "The *Quaestio de Formalitatibus* by John Duns Scotus, Sometimes Called the *Logica Scoti*," *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* 56 (2014): 91–182; and the excellent analysis of Dumont, "Duns Scotus's Parisian Question."

and entirely (*omnino*) simple so seriously that he denies that God, strictly speaking, has distinct divine attributes.⁶³

Ockham's argument for this daring claim is as follows. Wherever there is some multitude, there is some distinction. But everyone (as we have seen) says the divine attributes are many. Therefore, they are to be distinguished in some way among themselves and even from the divine essence, since they do not posit the essence as an attribute. Therefore, they are distinguished either from the nature of the thing (*ex natura rei*) or by reason alone. It cannot be by reason alone because, if the distinctions are formed by reason, then they are precisely beings of reason (*entia rationis*) and not something outside the soul, in which case, the supposed divine attributes do not correspond to anything in God.⁶⁴ Yet neither can it be *ex natura rei*, because then the attributes would have to be formally distinct, which cannot be, or the attributes would have to be distinct things, which everyone denies.⁶⁵

Ockham is convinced that Scotus's formal distinction must be false. Wherever there is some distinction or non-identity, some contradictory attributes can be verified of the things. But it is impossible that contradictions be true of each thing, unless those things are (1) distinct things, (2) distinct reasons, (3) beings of reason (*entia rationis*), or (4) a thing and a reason. But if all those contradictions are from the nature of the thing, not (2) distinct reasons or (4) a thing and a reason, then they are distinct things.⁶⁶ The major premise, he says, is clear, because, if *A* and *B* are not the same in every way, then both "*A* is the same as *A* in every way" and "*B* is not the same as *A* in every way" are true, such that "to be the same as *A* in every way" and "not to be the same as *A* in every way" are verified of *A* and *B*. But, Ockham says, this is exactly what Scotus claims when he says that divine wisdom is formally divine wisdom, and divine goodness is not formally divine wisdom. Universally, then, wherever there is some

⁶³ Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d. 2, q. 1, ad 1: "Dico quod perfectiones attributales, quae demonstrantur de divina essentia, non sunt realiter ipsa divina essentia" (*Guillelmi de Ockham opera philosophica et theologica*, *Opera Theologica*, vol. 2 [St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1970], 49[13–15]; note that, for Ockham's *Opera philosophica et theologica*, the *Opera theologica* [*OTb.*] volumes and the *Opera philosophica* [*Oph.*] volumes are numbered separately). As we will see, he argues for this position in q. 2 of the same distinction.

⁶⁴ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 2 (*OTb.*, 2:55[16–22]). Ockham educes a host of arguments against the distinction of the divine attributes by reason alone at *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 2 (*OTb.*, 54[9]–60[2]). See Armand Maurer, *The Philosophy of William of Ockham: In the Light of Its Principles* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999), 191–204.

⁶⁵ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 2 (*OTb.*, 2:63[1–10]).

⁶⁶ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 1 (*OTb.*, 2:14[10–16]).

distinction or non-identity, something is affirmed of one and truly denied of what remains.⁶⁷

He argues for the minor premise as follows. All contradictories have equal repugnance among themselves. There is as much repugnance between a soul and a non-soul or a donkey and a non-donkey as there is between God and non-God or between being (*ens*) and non-being.⁶⁸ From some contradictories, we can infer that those things from which the contradictories are verified are distinct things, distinct reasons, or a thing and a reason. Therefore, universally, nothing the same can truly be affirmed and truly denied except because of a distinction of thing(s) or reason(s). He then offers an example of each of the four situations he outlined above for the claim that, when *A* is, and *B* is not, there is a distinction of thing(s) or reason(s). For example, if a substance exists and an accident does not, it follows that they are not one thing, but distinct things (either in act or in potency). From the exhaustive list of examples, he concludes that, from the affirmation and negation of the same thing, we can infer a real non-identity. Therefore, if to be the same formally as wisdom is truly affirmed of wisdom and truly denied of goodness, it is necessary that divine wisdom and divine goodness convey something that is not really the same. They are not merely formally distinct, but really distinct.⁶⁹

Since, as Ockham has argued, everything that is formally distinct is, in fact, really distinct, divine simplicity demands that, from the nature of the thing, God's attributional perfections in no way be distinguished from the divine essence. If such perfections were distinguished from the essence, as Scotus describes, then we could not distinguish between the divine perfections and the divine persons. In the case of God, Ockham says that we should never distinguish anything formally except because of

⁶⁷ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 1 (*OTb.*, 2:14[16]–15[5]).

⁶⁸ Ockham notes one, unrelated exception in *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 1: "Nisi forte dicatur esse maior repugnantia inter ista quam inter illa propter maiorem perfectionem alicuius partis in una contradictione quam in alia. Sed hoc non est ad propositum" — "Unless perhaps it is said that there is a greater contradiction between these things than between those things because of a greater perfection of some part on one side of the contradiction than on the other. But this point is irrelevant to the current discussion" (*OTb.*, 2:15[9–12]).

⁶⁹ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 1 (*OTb.*, 2:15[6]–16[3]). Ockham offers another, more concise argument against the claim that things can be formally distinct. If *A* and *B* can be formally distinct yet really the same (as Scotus affirms of divine wisdom and divine goodness), then nothing could be proven to be really distinct, but only formally distinct. Even saying that a donkey is not rational and man is rational would not suffice to distinguish them really, only formally. Thus, man would be a donkey formally; see *Ord.*, I, d. 2, q. (*OTb.*, 2:16[4–14]).

a real distinction, and this applies only to the distinction between a divine relation (like paternity) and the essence. The divine essence and paternity are distinguished formally because, while we rightly say that the essence is paternity, we also say that the essence is filiation, but paternity is not filiation. The same holds true for the other divine relations. If we distinguished divine attributes in the same way, then we could not distinguish between the divine persons and the divine attributes, because, just as paternity is not filiation, it is also not wisdom. And since everything that is the divine essence is either absolute or relative, that which is absolute (wisdom, goodness, justice, etc.) is not distinguished from the divine essence in any way. We should not even concede something of one attribute that we deny of another regardless of whether we do so with any determination whatsoever or without a determination (unless there is a grammatical or logical impediment).⁷⁰

In the background of this argument is an ancient conviction that unity and intelligibility are at odds with one another.⁷¹ A thing is unintelligible to the extent that it is one and it is many to the extent that it is intelligible. A being that is intelligible can be whole, but not, strictly speaking, one. Ockham's insistence that "each and every singular thing is singular through itself" and that "everything outside the mind is really singular and one in number" makes it impossible to discover any intelligibility within any extramental being, especially in the case of God.⁷² So, divine attributes have to be both metaphysically and intelligibly one in God for Ockham.

Given that all the attributional perfections are identical with the divine essence in every way, Ockham still has to reckon with the fact that we cannot say that wisdom, goodness, and justice are completely the same. His answer focuses on the fact that *we* cannot say it. An attributional perfection can be taken in two ways. In the first way, it is taken for some divine perfection simply that really is God. This is the understanding Ockham has assumed up to this point in the discussion. Understood in this way, there cannot be many attributional perfections, but only one perfection that is indistinct both in reality and in reason. These perfections are not, strictly speaking, *in* God or *in* the divine essence, because they are the divine essence in every way. In the second way, an attributional perfection is nothing but a certain concept or sign that can be truly predicated of

⁷⁰ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 1 (*OTh.*, 2:19[3–24]).

⁷¹ This point is masterfully shown in Anton C. Pegis, "The Dilemma of Being and Unity," in *Essays in Thomism*, ed. Robert E. Brennan (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942), 149–83.

⁷² Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 6: "quaelibet res singularis se ipsa est singularis. . . . omnis res extra animam est realiter singularis et una numero" (*OTh.*, 2:196[2, 13–14]).

God. More properly, we should say that they are not attributional perfections in this case, because a perfection is a thing, not a concept. Thus, we should say that they are attributional concepts or attributional names.⁷³

Attributional concepts or names introduce the divine essence in three ways. Some do so absolutely and affirmatively, like “intellect” and “will.” Some do so connotatively by connoting something else, as “predestinating,” “creating,” or “creative” connote that which is predestined or created. Finally, some do so negatively, like “incorruptible,” and “immortal.” This connotation allows many attributes to be predicated of the divine essence.⁷⁴ These attributional concepts or names have been improperly taken as attributional perfections. So, if attributional perfections introduce perfection simply, and therefore the divine essence itself, and if attributional concepts or names were attributional perfections, then they would introduce distinctions in the divine essence. They are not attributional perfections, however, because they are names and concepts, but the divine essence is neither many concepts nor many names. Therefore, such attributes are not really the divine essence.⁷⁵

Ockham makes an important clarification in his reply to the first objection of *Ordinatio* I, d. 2, q. 2. Despite the fact that the attributional concepts and names are not the divine essence, the perfections that the names signify really are God. Thus, we truly say, “intellect really is God,” and “will really is God,” because, in these statements, the words “intellect” and “will” can have only personal supposition.⁷⁶ In the statement “intellect

⁷³ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 8, q. 2 (*OTb.*, 2:61[14]–62[4]).

⁷⁴ For Ockham, a connotative term is one that signifies something primarily and something else secondarily. The definitions of such terms express the meaning of the name (*definitio quid nominis*). Connotative terms are opposed to absolute terms, which terms signify primarily everything that is signified by the term and have real definitions (*definitio quid rei*). He uses “animal” as an example of an absolute term because it calls to mind animal, and only animal. “White,” however, is a connotative term because it signifies the thing that is white primarily, but secondarily signifies whiteness. See Ockham, *Summa logicae* I, chap. 10 (*OPh.*, 1:35–38).

⁷⁵ Ockham, *Ord.* I, d. 2, q. 2 (*OTb.*, 2:62[5–22]). Ockham says that it is obvious that the divine essence is not names. The divine essence is not concepts because concepts do not exist (*habet esse*) without an act of the intellect. But whatever is really the divine essence does not depend on an act of the intellect. Therefore, no such concept is really the divine essence

⁷⁶ Ockham distinguishes between three types of supposition: personal, simple, and material. Personal supposition occurs when a term stands for (*supponit pro*) the thing it signifies and does so significatively. Simple supposition occurs when a term stands for an intention of the soul that properly is not the thing signified by the term, because the term signifies real things and not intentions of the soul. E.g., “Man is a species.” Properly speaking,

and will are attributed,” then, they could have either personal, simple, or material supposition. If they have personal supposition, then the proposition is simply false, because no intellect, divine or created, is attributed. If they have simple or material supposition, then the proposition is true, because “intellect” and “will” stand for the concepts or words themselves. Concepts and words are attributed because they are predicable and knowable of God. If we take the first statements, “intellect really is God” and “will really is God,” such that “intellect” and “will” have simple or material supposition, then the statements are also simply false, because neither the concepts nor the words are really the divine essence, even though they stand for it.⁷⁷

Conclusion

All the Scholastics defend divine simplicity and the plurality of divine persons and divine attributes. Simplicity is central to their conceptions of God precisely because God is supremely one. His unity casts out all composition, although it does not preclude some sort of distinction. Earlier authors argue that the divine persons are really distinguished in ways that do not add anything to the divine essence, and so do not detract from divine simplicity. Moreover, the divine attributes are distinct by reason such that God really does have each of the attributes and he has them as one, yet our way of understanding identifies many attributes and uses many names for the attributes because of the limitation of our intellects. Scotus objects that a distinction of reason is insufficient to distinguish the divine attributes and instead opts for his formal distinction. The intelligible content of “goodness” and of “wisdom” are distinct regardless of where they are found or of what they are predicated. Thus, God’s goodness and wisdom have to be formally distinct. The intelligible content of goodness and wisdom do not morph into one just because they are in God. The intelligible content remains distinct.

Ockham goes even further, since he accepts a Platonic opposition between unity and intelligibility. God is supremely one, and so any internal intelligibility is banished from him. No distinction is possible within the

“man” refers to extramental objects. But in the sentence “Man is a species,” “man” stands for mental content because the content is a species. Material supposition occurs when a term is not used significantly but stands for some vocal or written sign. E.g., “Man’ is a noun.” In contemporary terminology, material supposition obtains when a word is mentioned, not used. See Ockham, *Summa logicae* I, chap. 63 (*OPh.*, 1:193–195).

⁷⁷ Ockham, *Ord.*, d. 2, q. 2, ad 1 (*OTb.*, 2:73[10]–74[8]).

divine attributes themselves. All we can say is that we have many distinct concepts or names that we use. The concepts and names, since they are concepts and names, can be predicated of God, but they are not attributes of God, since God is not a concept nor a name. NEV