

Complexity without Composition: Duns Scotus on Divine Simplicity

Jeff Steele and Thomas Williams

Abstract. John Duns Scotus recognizes complexity in God both at the level of God's being and at the level of God's attributes. Using the formal distinction and the notion of "unitive containment," he argues for real plurality in God, but in a way that permits him to affirm the doctrine of divine simplicity. We argue that his allegiance to the doctrine of divine simplicity is purely verbal, that he flatly denies traditional aspects of the doctrine as he had received it from Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, and that his denial of the doctrine allows him to escape certain counterintuitive consequences of the doctrine without falling afoul of the worries that motivated the doctrine in the first place. We note also an important consequence of Scotus's approach to simplicity for the correct interpretation of his view of the foundation of morality.

I. Motivations for Divine Simplicity

Unlike other attributes of God, divine simplicity is a negative attribute: it tells us what God is not, namely, that God lacks all metaphysical complexity or composition.¹ God does not have attributes of which he is composed. Rather, God is identical with his attributes. God does not have goodness, he *is* goodness. God does not have power, he *is* power. God is an utterly simple being. On the face of it, the doctrine might seem strange: what would be objectionable about claiming that God has attributes, like you and me?

One motivation behind divine simplicity stems from concerns about composition and aseity. Suppose God has metaphysical components that make him

¹We recognize that there are other aspects of divine simplicity, such as the view that God is not composed of spatial parts, nor is God composed of temporal parts. On these aspects Scotus is loyal to the tradition, and for the purposes of this paper we set them aside to focus on an area in which he is not.

what he is, such as attributes distinct from his essence. If so, then it seems that God would depend upon such attributes for his existence. Anselm states the problem in this way: “Every composite needs the things of which it is composed if it is to subsist, and it owes what it is to them, since whatever it is, it is through them, whereas those things are not through it what they are. And consequently a composite is absolutely not supreme.”² Thomas Aquinas raises this worry as follows: God is absolutely simple, he says, because “every composite is posterior to its components, and depends upon them. But God is the first being.”³ If God is composed of anything, then he would depend upon his parts to be what he is. But that runs afoul of the doctrine of divine aseity, which we’ll define as follows:

AS God does not depend on anything distinct from himself to be what he is.

Divine aseity is firmly rooted in the Anselmian tradition of perfect being theology: that God is a being than which none greater can be conceived.⁴ If God depends on his attributes to be what he is, then we could conceive of a being greater than “the being than which no greater can be conceived.” Hence, God must not depend upon his attributes for his existence. So God cannot have any metaphysical complexity. In other words, God must be absolutely simple.

So what do we mean when we say things such as “God is good” and “God is powerful”? These seem like distinct things: God’s power is a matter of what God can do—what God can actualize. God’s goodness seems to be an attribute pertaining either to God’s value as the most perfect being or to the moral perfection of his character and acts (or, of course, to both). But if God is simple these attributes can’t be distinct things in God, the way that they are in us. Perhaps, then, when we distinguish various divine attributes, it is our minds that make the distinction. Let’s call this the “conceptualist solution”: the distinction is on our part, not on God’s part. The distinction between God’s various attributes is mind-dependent: we distinguish these various attributes in our mind, but they are not distinct things in God. As Brian Shanley puts it, “Normally, an attribute picks out some property or feature of a thing that is metaphysically distinct from the nature of the thing. In God, however, what are described as ‘attributes’ are really all just different descriptions of the one divine nature, not something

²Anselm, *Monologion* 17: “Omne enim compositum ut subsistat, indiget iis ex quibus componitur, et illis debet quod est; quia quidquid est, per illa est, et illa quod sunt, per illud non sunt; et idcirco penitus summum non est.” (All translations are our own. Latin texts are taken from the standard critical editions, except in the case of *Reportatio* II-A, where, in default of a critical edition, we have relied on Merton College MS 61.)

³Aquinas, *STI*, q. 3, a. 7: “Secundo, quia omne compositum est posterius suis componentibus, et dependens ex eis. Deus autem est primum ens.”

⁴Anselm, *Proslogion* 2–5.

distinct from it.”⁵ On this view, God is altogether one, without any distinction among his attributes or any distinction between his attributes and himself. And this is the standard account defended by Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas.

While the conceptualist solution to the problem of God’s attributes staves off the composition worry, it leads to a difficult complication. If God *is* justice and God *is* mercy, then it seems by implication (transitivity of identity) that justice *is* mercy, goodness *is* power, and so on. Many medievals seem to bite the bullet and accept this surprising conclusion. For example, Augustine in *De Trinitate* states:

God is certainly described in many ways, such as great, good, wise, blessed, true, and whatever else does not seem to be said unworthily of him. But his greatness is identical with his wisdom (for he is not great in bulk but in power), and his goodness is identical with his wisdom and greatness, and his truth is identical with all of these. And it is not one thing for him to be blessed, and another to be great, or wise, or true, or good, or to be entirely himself.⁶

Anselm echoes this sentiment in *Monologion* 17:

Therefore, since that nature is in no way a composite and yet is in every way those many good things [supreme essence, justice, wisdom, truth, goodness, greatness, beauty, immortality, incorruptibility, immutability, happiness, eternity, power, unity, etc. (See *Monologion* 16)], it must be that all those things are not a plurality but one. So each of them is the same as all the others, whether all at once or individually. Thus, when he is said to be justice or essence, those words signify the same thing that the others do, whether all at once or individually. And therefore, just as whatever is said essentially of the supreme substance is one, so whatever he essentially is he is in one way and under one aspect. For when a human being is said to be body and rational and human, these three things are not said in one way or under one aspect. For he is body according to one, rational according to another, and neither of these individually is the whole of the fact that he is human. By contrast, the supreme essence is in no way like this. Whatever he is in any way, he is in every way and under every aspect. For whatever he in any way essentially is, that is the

⁵Brian J. Shanley, trans. and comm., *Thomas Aquinas: The Treatise on the Divine Nature, Summa Theologiae I, 1–13* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 203.

⁶Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.7.8: “Deus vero multipliciter quidem dicitur magnus, bonus, sapiens, beatus, verus, et quidquid aliud non indigne dici videtur; sed eadem magnitudo eius est quae sapientia (non enim mole magnus est sed virtute), et eadem bonitas quae sapientia et magnitudo, et eadem veritas quae illa omnia; et non est ibi aliud beatum esse et aliud magnum aut sapientem aut verum aut bonum esse aut omnino ipsum esse.”

whole of what he is. Therefore, whatever is truly said of his essence is not understood as expressing what sort of thing or how great he is, but rather as expressing what he is. For whatever is a thing of a certain quality or quantity is something else with respect to what it is, and so it is not simple but composite.⁷

There are not many attributes in God; there is simply God, who *is* these things. Any distinction between various attributes is on the part of our mind, not God's nature. So goodness is identical with power is identical with wisdom, is identical with God's essence is identical with God's existence. Thus the classical account of divine simplicity, best exemplified by Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, holds that (1) God is identical with his attributes; (2) these attributes are all identical with each other; and (3) any distinctions between these attributes are the result of the human mind and not God's nature.⁸

Philosophical difficulties arise immediately.⁹ For example, let us suppose (as many theists do) that God's creation could have gone otherwise than it did (say,

⁷Anselm, *Monologion* 17: "Cum igitur illa natura nullo modo composita sit, et tamen omnimodo tot illa bona sit, necesse est ut illa omnia non plura, sed unum sint. Idem igitur est quodlibet unum eorum quod omnia, sive simul sive singula. Ut cum dicitur iustitia vel essentia, idem significat quod alia, vel omnia simul vel singula. Quemadmodum itaque unum est quidquid essentialiter de summa substantia dicitur, ita ipsa uno modo, una consideratione est quidquid est essentialiter. Cum enim aliquis homo dicatur et corpus et rationalis et homo, non uno modo vel consideratione hæc tria dicitur. Secundum aliud enim est corpus, et secundum aliud rationalis, et singulum horum non est totum hoc quod est homo. Illa vero summa essentia nullo modo sic est aliquid, ut illud idem secundum alium modum aut secundum aliam considerationem non sit; quia quidquid aliquo modo essentialiter est, hoc est totum quod ipsa est. Nihil igitur quod de eius essentia vere dicitur, in eo quod qualis vel quanta, sed in eo quod quid sit accipitur. Quidquid enim est quale vel quantum, est etiam aliud in eo quod quid est; unde non simplex, sed compositum est."

⁸In his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas says that God's goodness and wisdom are distinct in *ratio*, not merely on the part of someone who thinks about them, but in virtue of the character of the thing itself ("sunt diversa ratione, non tantum ex parte ipsius ratiocinantis sed ex proprietate ipsius rei": *Sent.* I, d. 2, q. 2, a. 2, co.). (We are grateful to a reader for this journal for drawing this passage to our attention.) Whatever exactly Aquinas means by *ex proprietate ipsius rei*, he cannot be recognizing any kind of mind-independent plurality in God, since even in this article he insists that the attributes "are one in God, and there remains plurality only according to reason" ("in eo sunt unum, et remanet pluralitas tantum secundum rationem": ad2). Moreover, the reason Aquinas gives for holding that goodness and wisdom are *diversa ex proprietate ipsius rei* is that the *rationes* of goodness and wisdom must be in God if he is to be the cause of goodness and wisdom in creatures. But in *SCG* I, c. 29, n. 2 Aquinas denies that God and creature agree *in ratione*, because creatures are effects that fall short of their cause. (See also *SCG* I, c. 31, n. 2; *ST* I, q. 4, a. 3, co., ad3.) The discussions of simplicity in both *ST* and *SCG* make it clear that the divine attributes are only conceptually distinct.

⁹For a much more thorough account of Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity, including responses to the philosophical difficulties we sketch in this paragraph (along with a good many others), see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas, Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 92–130.

because it contains free creatures who could have acted otherwise than as they did). Then God's act of knowledge, which includes his knowledge of creatures, could have been otherwise than it is. But this contingent act of knowledge is supposed to be identical with God's essence, which is necessary. Or consider the sorts of things that are traditionally said about God's justice and mercy: that by his justice God punishes sinners but by his mercy he spares them. When Anselm expounds this difficulty in *Proslogion* 8–11, he avails himself of a distinction between mercy and justice. No one can understand why God punishes some sinners through his justice and spares others through his mercy, he says, though we know that he does. But on the understanding of divine simplicity that Anselm goes on to develop, the problem is far worse than mere mystery. Divine justice and divine mercy are one and the same, and both identical with the divine essence, so they can't be available to serve distinct roles in the economy of salvation.

We will argue that Scotus's solution presents a middle way between the problematic view that God has attributes that are distinct from his essence and upon which he depends, and the classical medieval view of simplicity that the distinction between the various attributes in God is merely a distinction on our part and not a mind-independent feature of the divine nature itself. Scotus does so by claiming that the distinctions between God's various attributes or features are not mind-dependent; instead, these attributes are already distinct on God's part, and their distinctness grounds our ability to make intelligible assertions about God. At the same time, by positing a formal distinction between God and his attributes, he insists that the attributes are all inseparable *in* God. But if Scotus posits distinct attributes in God, would that not lead to precisely the worries about aseity and composition that the doctrine of simplicity was erected to overcome? Scotus says "no," because there can be *complexity* in God without *composition*.

While this move to limit the types of complexity that introduce composition in God (and therefore would undermine divine simplicity) seems *ad hoc*, it allows Scotus to escape the unwanted conclusion that each attribute in God is identical with God and identical with each other, while at the same time upholding the motivation for simplicity in the first place: God's aseity. It does, however, constitute a rejection—in fact, though not in words—of the doctrine of divine simplicity as Scotus had received it. While we are not the first scholars to have noticed the differences between, say, Aquinas and Scotus on divine simplicity,¹⁰ we are the first to argue for this much larger implication: that at the end of

On the matter of divine knowledge in particular, see W. Matthews Grant, "Divine Simplicity, Contingent Truths, and Extrinsic Models of Divine Knowing," *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (2012): 254–74.

¹⁰See especially Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus on God* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 99–114.

the day, what is left in Scotus is not a mere tweaking of the doctrine of divine simplicity but rather a rejection of the doctrine in its traditional form. For the types of complexity that Scotus is willing to allow in God would have counted, for most of his predecessors, as composition, and therefore as incompatible with simplicity. To put it another way, the mainstream doctrine of divine simplicity is precisely the denial that there is any plurality in the divine nature; Scotus affirms that there is, and must be, plurality in the divine nature. Therefore, though he affirms that God is simple, he flatly denies the doctrine of divine simplicity as he had received it.

Our exposition proceeds in two stages. In the first (Section II), we develop the point that Scotus recognizes complexity in God not only at the level of the divine attributes but also (as has seldom been noticed) at the level of the divine essence. We show how he deploys the formal distinction and the notion of unitive containment to argue that there is, and must be, plurality in God, thus denying the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity. In the second (Section III), we consider the relevance of Scotus's account of the divine attributes as it relates to the debate over his view of the foundation of morality, arguing that it fatally undercuts one of the most powerful arguments in mitigation of his apparent voluntarism with respect to the contingent part of the moral law.

II. The Formal Distinction and Scotus's Account of God's Essence and Attributes

Thus far we have been emphasizing the divine *attributes* as an element of complexity or multiplicity in God. But for Scotus there is complexity in God not merely at the level of God's attributes but even at the level of God's *being*.¹¹ Scotus's characterization of the complexity at both levels is rooted in his formal distinction. The formal distinction falls in between a real distinction and a conceptual distinction: two realities are formally distinct when they are really identical but have different *rationes* (essential characteristics that make

¹¹We treat these two levels of complexity separately because Scotus does: though there is some commonality between the two discussions (his treatments of both kinds of complexity invoke the formal distinction and unitive containment, for example), they are not the same. This is no doubt because, although for Scotus the divine attributes count as transcendentals, in that they transcend the division of being into infinite and finite, they had not generally counted as transcendentals for other thinkers. Being, goodness, truth, and unity (the standard transcendentals) therefore required different arguments from those given concerning the divine attributes. There is also a heuristic value to treating the two levels separately: the complexity Scotus introduces to account for the (standard) transcendentals has largely been missed, and with it the extent of his departure from the standard understanding of divine simplicity.

something what it is) rooted in some aspect of the thing itself.¹² Two realities are *really identical* if and only if they are really inseparable. Thus, for any x and y ,

RI x and y are really identical = df. (a) it is logically impossible that x exist in reality without y ; and (b) it is logically impossible that y exist in reality without x .¹³

Conversely, two realities are *really distinct* if and only if they are capable of separate existence, at least by divine power. So, for any x and y ,

RD x and y are really distinct = df. (a) it is possible (at least by divine power) that x exists in reality without y ; and (b) it is possible (at least by divine power) that y exists in reality without x .

So Scotus's test for numerical identity is not complete sameness but inseparability. Once we have established that some x and y are numerically identical, we can then ask whether they are completely the same. If we can think about the same thing in different ways, or form distinct concepts about it, the aspects of that thing are conceptually distinct. Precisely, two realities are *conceptually distinct* when they are really identical (RI) and the distinction is caused by the mind alone. So, for any x and y ,

CD x and y are conceptually distinct = df. (1) x and y satisfy the conditions of (RI); and (2) x and y are only distinct insofar as (a) some mind has some concept that applies to x and not y ; and (b) some mind has some concept that applies to y and not x .

In other words, x and y are conceptually distinct if they are really identical but some mind conceives x without conceiving y , and some mind conceives y without conceiving x . Hence x and y are inseparable in reality but separable in the mind. For example, the Morning Star is really identical with the Evening Star, since both are Venus. But the concept *Morning Star* applies to the Morning Star and not the Evening Star, and the concept *Evening Star* applies to the Evening Star and not the Morning Star, and so the Morning Star and the Evening Star are conceptually distinct.

In contrast, two realities are *formally distinct* when they are really identical, but not entirely the same, and the difference between the two realities is not mind-dependent. So, for any x and y ,

¹²See *Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 4, n. 193.

¹³Scotus thinks that real inseparability is both necessary for real identity (*Ordinatio* II, d.1, qq. 4–5, nn. 200–2) and sufficient for real identity (see *Quodlibet* q. 3, n. 15). See Peter King, "Scotus on Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15–68, at 22–4; and Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus, Great Medieval Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 149.

FD x and y formally distinct = df. (1) x and y satisfy the conditions of (RI); and (2) (a) the *ratio* of x does not include the *ratio* of y ; and (b) the *ratio* of y does not include the *ratio* of x ; and (3) even if there were no minds thinking about x and y , (a) the *ratio* of x would not include the *ratio* of y and (b) the *ratio* of y would not include the *ratio* of x .¹⁴

Although two formally distinct realities are existentially inseparable, they have different *rationes*, not because the intellect thinks of the same thing in different ways, but because there is a formal difference in the thing itself. A formal difference is not made, but discovered, by the intellect.¹⁵ In other words, while two formally distinct concepts refer to exactly the same reality, something about each thing's respective *ratio* enables the mind to distinguish them. And this distinction is not mind-dependent, but a feature of the thing itself (*ex parte rei*).¹⁶ On Scotus's account, "two really identical but formally distinct realities will be something like distinct essential (i.e., inseparable) properties of a thing."¹⁷

Scotus conscripts the formal distinction for analyzing God in two ways relevant to divine simplicity: God's essence and God's attributes. In terms of God's essence, Scotus posits a formal distinction between God's being and its co-extensive attributes, namely, goodness, truth, and unity. Being is an unqualifiedly simple (*simpliciter simplex*) concept that cannot be broken down or explained in terms of something more fundamental; every other concept presupposes the concept *being* and cannot be conceived apart from being, while being can be conceived distinctly without the aid of another concept.¹⁸ Scotus describes "good," "one," and "true" as proper attributes (*passiones*) of being, formally distinct from

¹⁴In "Ockham on Identity and Distinction," *Franciscan Studies* 36 (1976): 5–74, at 35, Marilyn Adams formulates clause (2) of Scotus's formal distinction in the following way: "if x and y are capable of definition, the definition of x does not include y and the definition of y does not include x ; and [3] if x and y are not capable of definition, then if they were capable of definition, then the definition of x would not include y and the definition of y would not include x ." Scotus too formulates the formal distinction in this way at times (See *Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 4, n. 193). On her schematization of the formal distinction, being and good would fall under clause (3) since they are incapable of a real definition in terms of an Aristotelian classification—in terms of a genus, species, and differentia. But then (3) is completely unhelpful in determining the relationship between being, goodness, and other transcendentals, since it would simply claim that *if* being and goodness were definable, the definition of being would not be included in the definition of good and vice versa. It is helpful here to follow Peter King in noting that all definitions are *rationes*, but not all *rationes* are definitions. Something can lack a real Aristotelian definition while still having a set of characteristics that make it what it is—i.e., a *ratio*. So instead of formulating the formal distinction in terms of definitions, we have formulated it in terms of *rationes*. See King, "Scotus on Metaphysics," 23.

¹⁵*Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 4, n. 193.

¹⁶See *Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 4, nn. 172–93.

¹⁷Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 149.

¹⁸*Ordinatio* I, d. 3, pars 1, qq. 1–2, n. 71.

being itself.¹⁹ Scotus holds that being is predicated univocally of everything of which it is predicated *in quid*—both God and creatures. Before being is divided into the ten categories, it is “quantified” under two modes: infinite and finite. Finite being is then divided into Aristotle’s ten categories, which represent finite modes of being.²⁰ Thus in both modes of being, finite and infinite, being has these coextensive attributes: goodness, unity, and truth.

How these quasi-attributes function vis-à-vis God’s being can be best seen in Scotus’s understanding of predication. Following Porphyry, Scotus conceives of two types of predication: *in quid* predication and *in quale* predication. In *in quid* predication, the predicate expresses the essence of a thing (either its genus or its species); such predication answers the question “what is it?” (*Quid est?*). By contrast, in *in quale* predication, the predicate expresses some further qualification of the essence (such as a specific difference, property, or accident); such predication answers the question “what it is like?” (*Quale est?*).²¹ These distinctions are nothing new. However, in *Ordinatio* I, d. 8, Scotus applies the language of *in quid/in quale* predication to the transcendental order itself.²²

There the passage concerns whether Aristotle teaches the doctrine of the transcendentals. In answering the question, Scotus proposes several of Aristotle’s teachings that imply he does. First, Scotus claims that Aristotle says that truth and being are predicated univocally of both God and creatures. Second, Aristotle teaches that if being is predicated of God, it will be predicated *in quid*. Scotus concludes that Aristotle implicitly teaches (1) univocity of being and (2) that some transcendental predications are said *in quid*—he has in mind “being”—while other transcendental predications are said *in quale*. Scotus gives “true” as an example of the latter.²³ On this scheme, “being” is predicated *in quid*, while “true,”

¹⁹*Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 3, n. 114. See also *Quaestiones super Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* VI, q. 3, n. 20; *Ordinatio* II, d. 1, qq. 4–5, n. 273; and *Reportatio* II-A, d. 16, q. un.

²⁰*Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 3, n. 113. See also *Lectura* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 3, n. 107.

²¹See Allan B. Wolter, *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of John Duns Scotus* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1946), 79.

²²See *ibid.*, 81; Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez*, *Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* 107 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 414; and *Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 3, nn. 126–7.

²³*Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 3, n. 126: “Sed numquid Aristoteles ista praedicata generalia numquam docuit? Respondeo. Ex VIII Metaphysicae docuit nihil dici de Deo ut genus (ex auctoritate praeallegata), et tamen docuit univoce dici de Deo et creatura ‘veritatem’ II Metaphysicae, sicut supra allegatum est (ubi dicit ‘principia sempiternorum esse verissima’); et in hoc docuit entitatem dici univoce de Deo et creatura, quia subdit ibi (II Metaphysicae) quod ‘sicut unumquodque esse habet ad esse, sic se habet ad veritatem’; patet etiam—secundum eum—quod si ens dicitur de Deo, hoc erit in ‘quid’. Ergo implicite in istis docuit aliquod praedicatum transcendens dici in ‘quid’, et non esse genus nec definitionem, et alia praedicata transcendentia dici in ‘quale’ (ut verum), et tamen non esse propria nec accidentia secundum quod ista universalia competunt speciebus aliorum generum, quia nihil quod est species alicuius generis competit Deo aliquo modo.”

“good,” and “one” are predicated *in quale*. Since truth, goodness, and unity are coextensive attributes of being, of whatever being is predicated *in quid*—namely, everything that exists—truth, goodness, and unity will be predicated *in quale*. Predication *in quid* answers the question “What is it?”, so the fact that being can be predicated *in quid* of everything that exists means that everything that exists is a being; predication *in quale* describes the way something is,²⁴ and so the fact that unity, truth, and goodness can be predicated *in quale* of everything of which being is predicated *in quid* means that everything that exists has the qualities of unity, truth, and goodness. So the proper attributes of being—such as unity, truth, and goodness—are necessarily inseparable qualifications or properties of being. But since being comes in two modes—finite and infinite—this schema applies equally and univocally to God’s infinite being and the finite being of his creatures.²⁵ In both cases, being has proper attributes that are really identical (inseparable) and formally distinct.

The parallel here between God and creatures is striking and worth reiterating: although God and creatures have differing modes of being—finite and infinite—the manner in which proper attributes are ascribed to each entity is identical, and differs only in degree: just as every finite being has the necessarily coextensive properties of (finite) goodness, truth, and unity, so also infinite being has the necessarily coextensive properties of (infinite) goodness, truth, and unity.

Scotus’s terminology concerning the proper attributes of being fluctuates in many places. Sometimes, he simply calls them “attributes” (*passiones*) of being,²⁶ occasionally “proper attributes” (*passiones propriae*) of being,²⁷ and often “quasi-attributes” (*quasi passiones*).²⁸ Why the divergence in terminology? It seems that Scotus wavers in his terminology in order to emphasize different aspects of the relationship between being and its attributes. On the one hand,

²⁴See King, “Scotus on Metaphysics,” 59n17.

²⁵In univocal predication a predicate is applied with exactly the same meaning to two things. Scotus holds that such predicates as “being,” “good,” and “wise” are said univocally of God and creatures. For an accessible exposition of Scotus’s doctrine of univocity and his reasons for accepting univocity and rejecting analogy, see William E. Mann, “Duns Scotus on Natural and Supernatural Knowledge of God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 238–62, at 244–8. For a defense of univocity, see Thomas Williams, “The Doctrine of Univocity Is True and Salutary,” *Modern Theology* 21 (2005): 575–85. For debate, see Richard Cross, “Are Names Said Univocally of God and Creatures?” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 92 (2018): 313–20; and Brian Davies, “Response to Cross on ‘Are Names Said Univocally of God and Creatures?’” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 92 (2018): 333–6.

²⁶See *Ordinatio* II, d. 1, qq. 4–5, n. 273.

²⁷See *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, pars 1, q. 3, n. 134.

²⁸See *Quaestiones super Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* VI, q. 3, n. 20; *Ordinatio* III, d. 8, q. un., n. 50; and *Reportatio* II-A, d. 16, q. un.

Scotus seems to call them “attributes” or “proper attributes” to emphasize (1) their necessary coextensiveness with being and (2) their real identity with and formal difference from being.

On the other hand, when Scotus refers to them as “quasi-attributes,” he means to emphasize the peculiar relationship they have with being. Since being isn’t a thing, it doesn’t have real attributes in the strict sense, but it does have metaphysical “add-ons.” So in the case of being and its proper attributes, we are dealing with one further level of abstraction than from ordinary existent things. Accordingly, in order to underscore their peculiar relationship with being, he calls them “quasi-attributes,” emphasizing the fact that since being isn’t strictly a “thing,” it can’t have real attributes. Rather, it has “quasi-attributes” which function for being in the same way that real attributes of a subject function for that subject.

In his *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* IV.2, Scotus introduces the notion of unitive containment to explain the sense in which being and unity are convertible. Here, Scotus wishes to avoid two accounts of the relationship between being and its proper perfections. On the one hand, Scotus insists that being and its perfections are not distinct realities from the essence of the subject—that is, they are not really distinct from it, capable of independent existence. On the other hand, Scotus maintains that being and the perfections unitively contained under it are not simply distinct on the part of the mind (i.e., conceptually distinct); rather, the attributes contained under being are real perfections of the essence. It is noteworthy that he describes the distinction between being and the perfections unitively contained under it as “a lesser real difference, if we call any difference not caused by the intellect ‘real.’”²⁹

In *Reportatio* II-A, d. 16, appealing to Pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus claims that when one thing is unitively contained in another, the “two things” are neither completely the same nor completely distinct. Rather, unitive containment requires both unity and distinction.³⁰ One type of unitive containment occurs

²⁹*Quaestiones super Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* IV, q. 2, n. 143: “Sustineri ergo potest illa opinio de identitate reali sic: quod sicut essentia divina infinitas perfectiones continet et omnes unitive, sic quod non sunt alia res, sic essentia creata potest alias perfectiones unitive continere. Tamen in Deo quaelibet est infinita; et ideo proprie non potest dici pars unius totalis perfectionis; nec ab aliquo potest sumi ratio generis et differentiae quae semper per se important partem perfectionis specie potentialem et actuaalem, et ideo perfectionem limitatam. ¶ reatura quaelibet perfectio contenta limitata est, et limitatio essentia continente secundum totalitatem considerata. Ideo quaelibet potest dici pars perfectionis, non tamen realiter differens quod sit alia natura, sed alia perfectio realis—alietate, inquam, non causata ab intellectu, nec tamen tanta quantam intelligimus cum dicimus ‘diversae res’; sed differentia reali minori, si vocetur differentia realis omnis non causata ab intellectu.”

³⁰*Reportatio* II-A, d. 16, q. un. (Merton College MS 61, 179v–180r): “De continentia unitiva loquitur Dionysius, 5 De divinis nominibus, quia continentia unitiva non est omnino

when a subject unitively contains things which are quasi-attributes. For example, the attributes of being are not distinct things from being itself (that is, capable of separate existence). The reason for this, according to Scotus, is that being and its proper attributes are necessarily coextensive: no matter which one of these attributes is attributed to a thing, Scotus claims, that thing will be a being, true, and good. Scotus concludes that these proper attributes are not things other than being itself. However, he warns, just because these quasi-attributes are not completely distinct from being does not mean that they are part of the quiddity or essence of a thing: “Nonetheless, they are no more of the essence [of the thing], or identical with its quiddity, than [they would be] if they were distinct things.”³¹ They are, after all, predicated *in quale* and not *in quid*.

So prior to any discussion of the divine attributes themselves, Scotus posits necessary qualities of being that describe everything that has being, in both finite and infinite modes. Thus God, as infinite being, has the infinite qualities of unity, truth, and goodness that are necessary attributes of God’s being. Hence at the fundamental level of God’s being, a fair amount of complexity exists that was ruled out as incompatible with simplicity by the main lines of the tradition that Scotus inherits.

The other type of unitive containment concerns the relationship between God’s nature and his attributes, which is the second way in which Scotus posits a formal distinction in God relevant to divine simplicity. For Aquinas, all of God’s attributes are identical with each other and identical with God’s essence (distinguished only in our minds). In contrast, Scotus argues that the divine attributes must be necessarily coextensive with each other and with God’s essence, but distinct from each other (independently of our conception of them).

In *Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3, Scotus considers whether justice and mercy are distinguished in God. Scotus claims that the divine essence unitively contains the divine attributes:

The divine essence unitively contains every actuality of the divine essence.
Now things that are contained without any distinction are not *unitively*

eiusdem, ita quod idem omnino contineat se unitive, nec etiam omnino manentium distincte, requirit ergo unitatem et distinctionem.”

³¹*Reportatio* II-A d. 16 ¶ 1 n.; *ibid.*, 180r: “Est ergo continentia unitiva duplex: uno modo sicut inferius continet superiora essentialia, et ibi contenta sunt de essentia continentis, sicut eadem est realitas a qua accipitur differentia in albedine et a qua genus proximum, ut color et qualitas sensibilis et qualitas, et quamquam essent res aliae, unitive containerentur in albedine. Alia est continentia unitiva quando subiectum unitive continet aliqua quae sunt quasi passiones, sicut passiones entis non sunt res aliae ab ente, quia quaecumque detur, ipsa res est ens, vera, bona. Ergo vel oportet dicere quod non sunt res aliae ab ente, vel quod ens non habet passiones reales, quod est contra Aristotelem, IV *Metaphysicae* expresse. Nec tamen magis sunt tales passiones de essentia, nec idem quidditati [MS = quidditatem], quam si essent res aliae.”

contained, because there is no *union* if there isn't any distinction. Nor is there unitive containment of things that are unqualifiedly really distinct, because such things are contained in such a way that they remain many, that is, disparate. Therefore, this word "unitive" implies some sort of distinction between the things that are contained—enough of a distinction that they can be said to come together in some union, and yet the sort of union that rules out any composition or aggregation of distinct things. This can obtain only if one posits formal non-identity along with real identity.³²

According to Scotus, unitive containment requires some degree of sameness and some degree of distinction. Yet this is only possible when a formal distinction is posited with a real identity; hence, a formal distinction between two things is a necessary condition of unitive containment.

The reason is as follows: unions require parts or components. On the one hand, if two things are really distinct (capable of separate existence), then there is no true union in which one contains the other. On the other hand, if the two realities are completely the same, then there isn't a true union because there is only one thing—it would lack the metaphysical complexity needed. So both a union and a distinction are required for unitive containment, and this is possible only if the two realities are more than conceptually distinct. A conceptual distinction isn't enough because there is no real complexity and so no real union, but simply one thing. So unitive containment requires (1) some type of essential union and (2) some type of plurality. Only the formal distinction allows for both (1) and (2). Notice, then, that both at the level of God's being and at the level of God's attributes, Scotus suggests there exists complexity without composition.

So on Scotus's view, God has formally distinct quasi-attributes of being at one level, and formally distinct attributes of the essence at the other. We can admit, therefore, that some degree of complexity exists in God that is not dependent upon our minds: "there is, therefore, in God a distinction that is in every way prior to the intellect."³³ But doesn't that open up Scotus's account to the very worry for which simplicity (and a merely conceptual distinction between attributes) was originally deployed: namely, to stave off the concern

³²*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3, n. 74: "Ad primum, divinum 'esse' unitive continet omnem actualitatem divinae essentiae. Unitive non continentur quae sine omni distinctione continentur, quia unio non est sine omni distinctione; nec unitive continentur quae simpliciter realiter distincta continentur, quia illa multipliciter sive dispersim continentur. Hoc ergo vocabulum 'unitive' includit aliqualem distinctionem contentorum, quae sufficit ad unionem, et tamen talem unionem quae repugnat omni compositioni et aggregationi distinctorum; hoc non potest esse nisi ponatur non-identitas formalis cum identitate reali."

³³*Ordinatio* I, d. 8, pars 1, q. 4, n. 192: "Est ergo ibi distinctio praecedens intellectum omni modo."

that there is composition in God? A composite, Anselm argues, is posterior to its components and depends on them.³⁴ Aquinas repeats that objection to composition in God and adds three more: a composite requires a cause to bring its components together; every composite involves potentiality and actuality; and in any composite there is something that is not the whole.³⁵ For all these reasons, composition threatens divine aseity. Does Scotus's acknowledgment of complexity in God not introduce precisely that kind of composition?

Scotus's answer is straightforward: he claims that *only some* types of complexity threaten divine aseity, and divine simplicity means the absence of only those types of complexity. According to Scotus, the only type of complexity that is incompatible with divine simplicity or threatens divine aseity is what he calls "real composition." Real composition, as Scotus conceives it, involves either the existence of both potentiality and actuality or matter and form in a subject.³⁶ So while the formal distinction introduces a *real complexity* in God, it does not introduce *real composition*.

This solution, however, seems completely *ad hoc*: why is it the case that some types of complexity make for "real composition," while other types of complexity do not? It seems as though Scotus has offered us a sneaky redefinition of simplicity by redefining what it means to be a complex object: for he understands simplicity in terms of unitive containment, and unitive containment does not merely allow for plurality but actually *requires* plurality.³⁷ To someone committed to the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity, it seems that Scotus admits there is plurality and therefore complexity in God and yet denies there is real composition simply to sidestep the criticism that his view amounts to a denial of divine simplicity. To such a person Scotus's solution will appear *ad hoc* and unsatisfying. But we want to highlight two considerations that Scotus's account has in its favor vis-à-vis this worry.

First, with respect to aseity, Scotus can sidestep the problem as follows: the definition of divine aseity (AS) claimed that God does not depend on anything distinct from himself to be what he is. Since both the formal attributes of being and the rest of God's attributes are really identical with God as set forth in Scotus's formulation of real identity (that is, necessarily inseparable), Scotus can claim that these attributes are not distinct from God in a way that would threaten God's aseity: for that to be the case, they would have to be really distinct, as

³⁴*Monologion*, 17.


³⁵*ST I*, q. 3, a. 7, co.

³⁶*Ordinatio I*, d. 2, pars 2, qq. 1–4, n. 403, and d. 8, pars 1, q. 3.

³⁷For this reason an appeal to Scotus's notion of intensively infinite attributes will not suffice to exclude real complexity in God. (We owe this point to a reader.) Yes, the divine attributes are intensively infinite, but there is a plurality of such attributes, which are all unitively contained in the divine essence.

set forth in Scotus's formulation of the real distinction (RD). Since the formal distinction implies a real identity and formal difference, it staves off this worry, both at the level of essence and at the level of attributes. Formalities are *really* identical with God's essence.

Second, it may not be *ad hoc* for the following reason: according to Scotus, some complexity among God's attributes is necessary for explaining distinct divine actions. One needs formalities—contra Aquinas—to explain distinct ways in which God acts in the world. Divine actions, according to Scotus, must find their grounding in attributes of God. If God lacks all metaphysical distinctions—as Aquinas emphatically states—then it seems difficult, perhaps impossible, to explain why God acts in accordance with his mercy at some times and with respect to certain persons, and he acts in accordance with his justice at other times and with respect to other persons:

I concede that just as in God intellect is not formally will and vice versa, even though one is the same as the other in terms of the truest identity of simplicity, so too justice is not formally the same as mercy or vice versa. And because of this formal non-identity one can be the proximate principle of some external effect of which the other is not a formal principle, just as if they were two things, since being a formal principle belongs to something insofar as it has such-and-such a formal character.³⁸ 

III. Simplicity and the Foundations of Ethics

Scotus's de facto denial of divine simplicity—that is, his insistence that there is mind-independent plurality in God—is important for more than just his metaphysics. It is also fundamental for defending the view that Scotus is a voluntarist with respect to the moral law. For the purposes of the present paper, we will take it for granted that there is a strong *prima facie* case for reading Scotus as a voluntarist with respect to God's willing of the moral law.³⁹ To put the matter

³⁸*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3, n. 71: “Concedo igitur, ad illam rationem, quod sicut in Deo intellectus non est formaliter voluntas, nec e converso, licet unum sit verissima identitate simplicitatis idem alteri, ita et iustitia non est formaliter idem misericordiae vel e converso. Et propter hanc non-identitatem formalem potest istud esse proximum principium alicuius effectus extra, cuius reliquum non est principium formale eo modo sicut si hoc et illud essent duae res, quia ‘esse principium formale’ competit alicui ut est tale formaliter.”

³⁹The debate over the nature and extent of Scotus's voluntarism flourished in the 1990s and petered out without any particular resolution; contemporary treatments of Scotus's ethics often restate the issues in the terms in which that debate was carried on—with Thomas Williams as the lone voice of voluntarism and Allan B. Wolter and Mary Beth Ingham as the leading voices of a less uncompromisingly voluntaristic reading—and then move on to other matters without attempting to adjudicate between the different readings or to reframe the debate in some more productive way. See, for example, Oleg Bychkov, “In Harmony with Reason’: John Duns Scotus’s Theo-aesth/

precisely, Scotus repeatedly says (1) that most of the moral law is contingent, (2) that contingent moral truths have their truth values only because of God's will, and (3) that God's will with respect to those truths is not constrained by any facts about God's nature, human nature, or the content of the truths themselves. Let us call the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) "voluntarism with respect to the moral law" (or "voluntarism" for short) and stipulate for the purposes of this paper that Scotus's repeated and unqualified affirmations of (1), (2), and (3) constitute a strong *prima facie* case that Scotus accepts voluntarism.⁴⁰

How might one resist this *prima facie* case? There are several different approaches in the literature, all of them intended to undermine (3) by pointing to some fact or combination of facts about divine or human nature that would limit God's freedom with respect to the moral law and thereby mitigate the apparent arbitrariness of Scotus's voluntarism. Some writers appeal to divine justice,⁴¹ others to divine rationality,⁴² and others, more recently, to divine aesthetic sensibility.⁴³ One such challenge, defended most compellingly by Mary Beth Ingham, comes from an appeal to divine simplicity.

ethics," *Open Theology* 1 (2014): 45–55; and A. Vos et al., eds., *Duns Scotus on Divine Love: Texts and Commentary on Goodness and Freedom, God and Humans* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 58–64. This is unfortunate, since the completion of the critical edition of the *Ordinatio* in the meantime has rendered a fair bit of that earlier debate obsolete. To take just one example, a major point of contention (and the focus of Wolter's "The Unshredded Scotus," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77 [2003]: 315–56) was how to interpret Scotus's statement that "things other than God are good because God wills them, and not vice versa." That statement appears nowhere in the critical editions. Moreover, some recent work, most notably Tully Borland and T. Allan Hillman's "Scotus and God's Arbitrary Will: A Reassessment" (*American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91 [2017]: 399–429) and another by Thomas Ward's "A Most Mitigated Friar: Scotus on Natural Law and Divine Freedom" (*American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 93 [2019]: 385–409), has introduced new complexity into the debate. The time is therefore right for a fresh consideration of Scotus's voluntarism, though we do not attempt such a thing in the present paper.

⁴⁰For the texts, see Thomas Williams, "The Unmitigated Scotus," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 80 (1998): 162–81; "The Libertarian Foundations of Scotus's Moral Philosophy," *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 193–215; "Reason, Morality, and Voluntarism in Duns Scotus: A Pseudo-Problem Dissolved," *The Modern Schoolman* 74 (1997): 73–94; and "How Scotus Separates Morality from Happiness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69 (1995): 425–45.

⁴¹For defenses of such an argument, see Wolter, "Introduction," *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 3–29; and Mary Beth Ingham, "Letting Scotus Speak for Himself," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2001): 173–216. For rebuttals, see Richard Cross, "Duns Scotus on Goodness, Justice, and What God Can Do," *Theological Studies* 48 (1997): 48–76; and Thomas Williams, "A Most Methodical Lover? On Scotus's Arbitrary Creator," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000): 169–202.

⁴²For defenses of such an argument, see Wolter, "Introduction," and Ingham, "Letting Scotus Speak for Himself." For a rebuttal, see Williams, "The Unmitigated Scotus."

⁴³For defenses of such an argument, see Oleg Bychkov, "'In Harmony with Reason': John Duns Scotus's Theo-aesthetics," *Open Theology* 1 (2014): 45–55; and Richard Cross, "Natural Law, Moral Constructivism, and Scotus's Metaethics: The Centrality of Aesthetic Explana-

The crucial point of Ingham's argument is that a voluntaristic reading of Scotus's moral theory requires a fairly stark separation between the divine intellect and the divine will. According to voluntarism, the divine intellect cognizes nearly all moral propositions as "neutral"—that is, as neither true nor false—prior to any act of the divine will. God then wills that some of these propositions be true and others false, and there is nothing in the divine intellect's presentation of these neutral moral propositions that constrains his choice as to which will be true and which will be false. Only after the divine will determines the truth values of such propositions does the divine intellect know those truth values.

Ingham objects that by driving such a wedge between the divine will and the divine intellect, the voluntarist reading of Scotus "overlooks the importance of divine simplicity in any discussion of God."⁴⁴ She argues:

The divine will necessarily expresses the divine essence, since God is one. Divine will-acts are harmonious with the nature of God, that is, with love. Scotus's basic insight about the divine will is that God always acts according to his own nature. In other words, divine simplicity requires that divine acts of will necessarily express the divine essence as love. . . . The identity of the divine will with the divine essence is central to Scotus's discussion of the nature of God's justice.⁴⁵

But in fact divine simplicity is not so much as mentioned in the question on divine justice (*Ordinatio* 4, d. 46, q. 1), even though an appeal to simplicity could sometimes give Scotus the conclusion he is after with rather less fuss. For example, at nn. 28–36, Scotus argues at great length that there is only one justice in God—one both really and conceptually—without mentioning divine simplicity. If Scotus had thought simplicity were relevant here, he could have invoked it to settle the issue much more quickly and decisively, at least as regards the claim that there is only one justice in reality. (Divine simplicity does not guarantee conceptual simplicity, of course.)

But this, admittedly, is weak evidence. Scotus is not really known for taking the easiest argumentative route to his conclusions. More important is the fact that throughout his discussion of divine justice Scotus contrasts God's will with

tion," in *Reason, Religion, and Natural Law: From Plato to Spinoza*, ed. J. A. Jacobs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 175–97. For a rebuttal, see Jeff Steele, "Duns Scotus, the Natural Law, and the Irrelevance of Aesthetic Explanation," *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 4 (2016): 78–99.

⁴⁴Ingham, "Letting Scotus Speak for Himself," 197.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 198. Ingham's appeal to simplicity is twofold: there is the negative appeal to rule out the voluntarist reading's sharp distinction between the divine intellect and the divine will, and then the positive appeal to ground an alternative reading of the foundation of the moral law on the identity between the divine essence and the divine will as love. (The two steps are not explicitly distinguished.) Scotus's understanding of divine simplicity as we present it undercuts both appeals.

his intellect in a variety of ways that militate against a straightforward appeal to simplicity.⁴⁶ Their respective activities take place at different instants of nature: “The divine intellect apprehends a possible action before the will wills it” (n. 42). They relate to their objects in different ways: “The intellect tends to its object in its way, naturally, and the will in its way, freely” (n. 43). And the distinction between their primary and secondary objects is different: “The intellect relates to its secondary objects necessarily, whereas the will relates to its secondary objects only contingently” (n. 30).

Indeed, Scotus regularly makes just the sort of sharp distinction between divine will and divine intellect that Ingham’s use of divine simplicity would forbid. Consider these representative passages, the first taken from the discussion of divine justice, the second and third from discussions of contingency:

The intellect apprehends a possible action before the will wills it, but it does not apprehend determinately that this particular action is to be done, where “apprehend” means “dictate.” Rather, it offers that possible action to the divine will as something neutral; and when the will through its own volition determines that this action is to be done, the intellect as a consequence apprehends “This is to be done” as true.⁴⁷

We can distinguish instants of nature: in the first instant the divine intellect apprehends everything within the domain of possible action (both the principles of possible actions and particular possible actions); in the second instant it presents them all to the divine will, which accepts some of them—both some of the practical principles and some of the particular possible actions; and then in the third instant the intellect knows those particulars and those universals equally immediately.⁴⁸

Hence, when the divine intellect, before an act of the will, apprehends the proposition “*x* is to be done,” it apprehends it as neutral, just as when I

⁴⁶As we have shown, even prior to the distinction between God’s attributes (including his powers) there is a distinction at the level of God’s being, between God’s being and his goodness. In the first passage we quote from Ingham, the argument from simplicity is developed at the level of God’s being; in other passages, it is developed at the level of God’s powers or attributes. Scotus’s actual treatment of divine simplicity rules out both versions of the argument.

⁴⁷*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 1, n. 42: “dico quod intellectus apprehendit agibile antequam voluntas illud velit, sed non apprehendit determinate ‘hoc esse agendum’, quod ‘apprehendere’ dicitur ‘dictare’; immo, ut neutrum, offert voluntati divinae, qua determinante—per volitionem suam ‘istud esse agendum’—intellectus consequenter apprehendit tamquam verum ‘istud agendum’.”

⁴⁸*Ordinatio* I, d. 38, q. un., n. 10: “sed distinguendo de instantibus naturae, in primo apprehendit quodcumque operabile (ita illa quae sunt principia operabilium, sicut operabilia particularia, et in secundo offert omnia ista voluntati (quorum omnium alia acceptat, tam principiorum quam particularium operabilium), et tunc tertio signo intellectus scit aequè immediate illa particularia sicut illa universalia.”

apprehend the proposition “There is an even number of stars”; but once x is produced in being by an act of the divine will, then x is apprehended by the divine intellect as a true object.⁴⁹

The most decisive evidence, however, comes when Scotus explicitly considers the relevance of divine simplicity to the question raised in *Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3: “Are justice and mercy distinct in God?” The argument that they are not distinct is the expected argument from simplicity: “*City of God* XI.10: ‘God is simple: whatever he has, he is.’ . . . Therefore, God is justice, and God is mercy. Therefore, God’s justice is God’s mercy.”⁵⁰ Scotus replies that divine simplicity, as he understands it, does not warrant such a strong conclusion:

As for the argument for the negative, it proves the true identity of anything in God to anything else, speaking of whatever is intrinsic to God. But from this it does not follow that everything in God is *formally* the same as everything else, since true identity—indeed the very truest identity, which is sufficient for something’s being altogether simple—is compatible with formal non-identity.⁵¹ The formal non-identity of the divine attributes is enough to open up the possibility that a particular divine act proceeds from one divine attribute and not another:

Just as in God intellect is not formally will and vice versa, even though one is the same as the other in terms of the truest identity of simplicity, so too justice is not formally the same as mercy or vice versa. And because of this formal non-identity one can be the proximate principle of some external effect of which the other is not a formal principle, just as if they were two things, since being a formal principle belongs to something insofar as it has such-and-such a formal character.⁵²

⁴⁹*Lectura* I, d. 39, qq. 1–5, n. 44: “Unde quando intellectus divinus apprehendit ‘hoc esse faciendum’ ante voluntatis actum, apprehendit ut neutrum, sicut cum apprehendo ‘astra esse paria’; sed quando per actum voluntatis producitur in esse, tunc est apprehensum ab intellectu divino ut obiectum verum.”

⁵⁰*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3, n. 62: “XI *De civitate* 10: ‘Eo simplex est Deus, quod est quidquid habet’ . . . ergo Deus est iustitia, Deus est misericordia,—igitur hoc est hoc.”

⁵¹*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3, n. 78: “Ad argumentum in oppositum, probat veram identitatem in Deo cuiuscumque ad quodcumque, loquendo de intrinsecis ipsi Deo; sed ex hoc non sequitur ‘ergo quidlibet est formaliter idem cuilibet’, quia vera identitas, immo verissima, quae sufficit ad omnino simplex, potest stare cum nonidentitate formali.”

⁵²*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3, n. 71: “Concedo igitur, ad illam rationem, quod sicut in Deo intellectus non est formaliter voluntas, nec e converso, licet unum sit verissima identitate simplicitatis idem alteri, ita et iustitia non est formaliter idem misericordiae vel e converso. Et propter hanc non-identitatem formalem potest istud esse proximum principium alicuius effectus extra, cuius reliquum non est principium formale eo modo sicut si hoc et illud essent duae res, quia ‘esse principium formale’ competit alicui ut est tale formaliter.”

This sort of argument militates rather strongly against any straightforward appeal to simplicity to support the claim that every divine act of will proceeds from love. Maybe that claim is true, but it does not follow from the doctrine of divine simplicity, since Scotus argues here that simplicity is consistent with the claim that some particular divine attribute is not a formal principle of some actual divine act *ad extra*.

IV. Conclusion

Views about what types of plurality or multiplicity are excluded by divine simplicity depend upon a whole host of unshared metaphysical assumptions, such as what counts as complexity in God. Aquinas and Scotus would agree that God lacks composition in terms of a form/matter structure. However, they disagree concerning the claims (1) that God is altogether identical with his attributes, (2) that such attributes are altogether identical with each other,⁵³ and (3) that the distinctions between these attributes are the result of the human mind and not God's nature.

Aquinas's account of simplicity, like that of Augustine and Anselm, affirms all of these claims; Scotus adamantly rejects them. Scotus's view seems like a sneaky reinterpretation of simplicity in order to fit within his unique metaphysical framework, namely, the univocal predication of being with respect to God and creatures. Given that (for example) being, truth, unity, and goodness are not altogether identical, when we predicate being, truth, unity, and goodness of something—whether that something is God or a creature—those predications do not pick out altogether the same thing.

Scotus's account does have its virtues, however: it can explain why distinct types of divine acts can be grounded in distinct attributes of God, and it can do so without compromising divine aseity. So on divine simplicity—as on many other issues, such as natural law—Scotus writes within the language of his day, while undermining the concepts with subversive interpretations. Is his account of divine simplicity plausible? We think it depends upon the metaphysical underpinnings, specifically, upon whether the formal distinction itself is defensible. But in either case, this much is clear: if we define divine simplicity in the manner insisted upon by the classical theism best exemplified by Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—namely, that God is altogether identical with his attributes and these attributes are altogether identical with each other—then it's obvious that Scotus rejects the doctrine of divine simplicity. What he calls simplicity involves mind-independent plurality—complexity, even if not (on Scotus's stipulative

⁵³Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 29.

understanding of the word) composition—in God: precisely what his predecessors ruled out in the name of divine simplicity.

Santa Clara University
Santa Clara, California

University of South Florida
Tampa, Florida