

The Absolute Simplicity of God and  
the Distinction Among the Divine  
Attributes: A Comparison of the Thoughts  
of St. Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus

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Knowledge and understanding of the nature of God, much more whether he even exists, is a concern that has occupied the minds of all since the beginning of man's existence. It is not a problem that is easily dismissed nor easily resolved. It will be the intention of this paper to discuss but a small part of the question of God's nature; yet it is a very important one.

In this paper, I intend to discuss the absolute simplicity of God, that is, the proposition that God is not composite ~~nor~~ made up of parts but rather is altogether simple or One. In considering God's absolute simplicity, one must consider how simplicity is indicative of what we call God and in what ways we can reasonably admit this. One must also look to the attributes of God; attributes being those things which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of God. Determination of the relationship between the attributes of God is an essential part of this question. If one were to hold that God is in reality altogether simple, then it would be necessary to hold that all of God's attributes are inseparable for one to be consistent. For to hold otherwise would be to say that God is made up of parts or is composite and therefore not altogether simple. For it is the essence of absolute simplicity to be One. This will be the central focus of this paper.

In discussing this I will introduce and treat the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. For Thomas' teaching on this matter I will utilize Question Three, Article Seven of the Summa Theologica. In this article, Thomas treats the question of the absolute simplicity of God. Although Thomas would hold that this is a matter of faith, yet he also gives several arguments from reason which demonstrate that God is indeed altogether simple.

I will also introduce the Scotian notion of formal distinction. This is a distinction which Scotus devised as an intermediary between real and logical distinction. This will provide the tool necessary for further discussion of how Scotus views the distinction between God's attributes. Utilizing the formal distinction, I will show how Scotus is able to admit that God's attributes are more than just logically distinct.

Even though Thomas in his Summa never talks directly about the distinction between the divine attributes, I will attempt a Thomist reply to Scotus' admission of a formal distinction between those attributes.

In the Seventh Article of the Third Question in his Summa, Thomas concerns himself with whether God is altogether simple. This article depends on and is a synthesis of many points and demonstrations of previous articles. The difficulty with this question is that created things, which are

images of God, are composite. And among created things, composition is better than simplicity, as is brought out in the second objection. Thus, chemical compounds are better than elements, and elements better than the parts that compose them.<sup>1</sup> The body of the article provides many arguments from reason which have their foundation in doctrines from the preceding articles and in the truths that God is first Being, the first Cause, pure Act and self-subsisting Being. He demonstrates the absolute simplicity of God in the following five ways:

(1) From the previous articles in this question, he has shown that in God there is neither composition nor quantitative parts; His nature does not differ from his suppositum; His Essence does not differ from His Being; in Him there is no composition of genus and difference; and in Him there is no composition of subject and accident.<sup>2</sup> From this, Thomas demonstrates that there is no composition in God, physical or metaphysical.<sup>3</sup>

(2) The second way is that every composite is posterior to its component parts, and is dependent on them. But God is first Being and therefore altogether simple.<sup>4</sup> In understanding what Thomas is saying here, we must realize that everything that is composite follows from its component parts. It follows in terms of nature if not also in terms of time because the composite itself is a result of the parts and is dependent on anything preceding it. Therefore, from this,

we can conclude that God is altogether simple.<sup>5</sup>

(3) In the third way Thomas begins by indicating that every composite has a cause. But God is the first uncaused Cause and therefore not composite.<sup>6</sup> To understand the major premise in this argument, we must look at what Thomas means in it. He is saying that things in themselves which are different can not unite unless something caused them to do so. In other words, it is impossible to have an uncaused union of different things.<sup>7</sup> And since truth has it that God is the first Cause, then it is evident that He is not composite.

(4) In every composite there must be potentiality and actuality, but in God there is no potentiality but He is pure actuality. Therefore God is not composite.<sup>8</sup> Thomas' major premise of this argument is easily understood. If we discuss composition in regards to essential or natural unity of a thing, we have matter and form which are the elements of potentiality and actuality respectively. If, on the other hand, we are talking about the accidental unity of a composition we have substance and accident which are elements of potentiality and actuality respectively.<sup>9</sup> In terms of the composition of essence and existence (essence being the element of potentiality and existence being the element of actuality) Thomas shows in a previous article that God's essence is His existence and that existence is Pure Act. And if we accept as truth that God is Pure Act, then it is

evident that God is not a composition.

(5) The final way is that in anything composite, none of its parts can be predicated of the whole. In everything that is composite, there is something which is not it itself. This, however, cannot be said of form because in form itself there is nothing besides itself. Therefore, since God is absolute form, He can in no way be composite.<sup>10</sup> In other words, what Thomas is saying is that in anything composite there is no part of that thing that can be predicated of the whole. In the example of man, there is no part of man which is man. But in God, being altogether simple and not composite, whatever is in Him is God. If we take the example of air we see that parts of the air are air but not the whole air. But in God, whatever is in Him is the whole of God and not a part of Him.<sup>11</sup> Accepting the truth that God is pure form and the principle that in form itself there is nothing besides itself, it follows then that God is not composite.

Before going onto a discussion of the distinction between the divine attributes and what a Thomist notion of that would be, it might be appropriate if we look at the various types of distinctions that can be made between two or more things. The two most basic types of distinction are the real and the logical distinction.

A real distinction is a distinction which exists between two separable things or beings. The Scholastics had

four signs that would indicate a real distinction between two things. They are: (1) One of them could change without the other changing. It would be a contradiction to say that the same thing changed and did not change. (2) The two can be separated from each other and both will continue to exist--for nothing can be separated from itself. (3) One is produced by the other--for nothing can produce itself. (4) If there were a real opposition between the two things, in which case it could be reduced to a contradiction.<sup>12</sup>

As can be seen, in a real distinction one is distinguishing between two separable things that are not just separate in the mind but in reality. This is not so with a logical or virtual distinction. A distinction of this sort is a purely mental distinction with no objective distinction in the thing itself. It lies between two concepts of the same being. But the thing itself does offer us a reason for making the distinction so there is a foundation in reality for a logical distinction.<sup>13</sup>

Scotus found it necessary to introduce the notion of a formal distinction to that of real and logical distinction. This formal distinction is something less than a real distinction and more than a logical distinction made in the mind. It is an objective distinction between two formalities and not between one thing and another. The properties of these formalities are as follows: (1) The formality is not a

a distinct physical thing but something less than a thing.

(2) Each formality has its own proper identity. Because of the simplicity of the formality, it may not be possible to define it but if it could be defined, the definitions of the two formalities would be essentially different. (3) Since the formalities exist by virtue of the existence of a thing and do not have their own distinct existence, they are inseparable.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the Scholastics rejected this theory of formal distinction altogether. For them, there is no possible middle position between real and logical distinction. They think that the formalities refer to either two beings or one and that the formal distinction is contradictory because it is supposed to exist only in the mind and not only in the mind.<sup>15</sup>

According to the Thomist point of view, there exists a logical distinction between the divine attributes. It is a logical one because it is non-existent previous to the mind's consideration of it. This, at first, may not be clear but consider the line of reasoning. In God, there is no real foundation for conceiving anything in potentiality; for whatever is conceived in God must be conceived as pure act. Now, God's nature as we know it or conceive it contains His attributes more than just logically or virtually; they are contained more so actually, that is, in reality. In other

words, since what we conceive in God (His attributes) is in actuality (Pure Act) and existent in the entity itself, then the foundation for this conception is real and existent before the mind's consideration of it. For those attributes are in reality existent in God and not dependent on any mind's consideration of them for their existence.<sup>16</sup>

This, however, is not true for the distinction we make between the attributes themselves. The distinctions we make between the divine attributes are non-existent previous to the mind's making those distinctions. The Thomist holds that all the divine attributes include one another actually and implicitly. Therefore, any distinction we make between them is one that is in the mind alone and not in the thing itself. In other words, "The attributes are formally in God, but not formally distinct."<sup>17</sup>

Scotus maintains that there is at least a logical foundation for the distinction between the divine attributes because of the very fact that we give names for those different attributes and differentiate among them. But he goes further to admit a formal distinction between the attributes in God which is previous to the mind's consideration of them. Scotus holds that since natures have an intelligible identity of their own, there is a formal distinction between the different attributes which correspond to those natures actually found in God. Now, this distinction it must be noted, is

something less than a real distinction and this plurality of formalities which he posits does not destroy the absolute unity or simplicity of God.<sup>18</sup>

It is only in this way that we can know that God acts in ways that are consistent with the different attributes that are in Him and that we conceive in Him. In this way, we know that God punishes out of His justice and pardons out of His mercy. This necessitates that the divine attributes be formally distinct, that is, something more than logically distinct.<sup>19</sup> The basis for this distinction, it must be remembered, is the existence in reality of formally distinct entities.<sup>20</sup> Scotus' reasoning as to how he can admit a formal distinction between the divine attributes and not destroy the absolute unity of Infinite Being is best expressed as follows:

"Since Scotus does not accept the real composition of essence and existence, he can attribute several formal entities to any being without disrupting its actual unity. The formalities thus conceived are therefore both really distinct formal entities in the thing, and really one as sharing in the actual being of the whole whose parts they are."<sup>21</sup>

The Thomists answer Scotus with his notion of formal distinction by saying that this formal distinction which he posits between the divine attributes if it is anything more than a logical distinction and has existence before the mind's consideration of it, then it is already a real distinction even though it may be slight. This, then, would be contrary

to the absolute simplicity of God. To the Thomist, "Scotus ends in extreme realism and in a certain anthropomorphism, since he posits in God a distinction that exists only in the mind."<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Scotus views this formal distinction as an intermediary between real and logical distinction. And as was presented before, Scotus does not accept the notion of the real composition of essence and existence and so he can attribute several formalities to one being, without disrupting or destroying the unity or oneness of that being.

As can be seen, Thomas and Scotus have two opposing views on how the divine attributes are distinct in God, yet they both hold to the principle that He is absolutely simple and not composite. They both present reasonable argumentation which leads them from their notions about the divine attributes to the absolute simplicity of God. It would seem that the problem lies in the way that each has structured their metaphysics; they both have different ways of understanding and explaining reality even though they probably had very similar worldviews.

Scotus has long been noted as the "Subtle Doctor" which may give some insight into some of the notions and ideas he devised, in this case, the formal distinction. It may be that Scotus has gotten too subtle and has made more out of the distinction between the divine attributes than was actually necessary or warranted. It seems that the structure

and ideas that Thomas presents are adequate to understand the distinction between the divine attributes and the simplicity of God. Scotus, by introducing the formal distinction, seems to have confused the issue more rather than shedding anymore light on the question.

Despite Scotus' subtlties he, like Thomas, tried to present ideas and notions which were compatible with those ideas and notions which he believed from faith in the pursuit of understanding the truth about God. In this case, that is the belief that God is One and altogether simple.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Q3; VII.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Renigald Garrigou-La Grange, The One God: A Commentary on the First Part of St. Thomas' Theological Summa (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, Inc., 1943), p. 191.
- 4 Summa Theologica, Q3; VII.
- 5 Garrigou-La Grange, p. 192.
- 6 Summa Theologica, Q3; VII.
- 7 Garrigou-La Grange, p. 192.
- 8 Summa Theologica, Q3; VII.
- 9 Garrigou-La Grange, p. 192.
- 10 Summa Theologica, Q3; VII.
- 11 Garrigou-La Grange, p. 193.
- 12 A. C. Cotter, ABC of Scholastic Philosophy (Weston: The Weston College Press, 1947), p. 336.
- 13 Ibid., p. 337.
- 14 James Collins, Readings in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy (Westminster: Newman Press, 1960), pp. 285-86.
- 15 Cotter, p. 338.
- 16 Garrigou-La Grange, pp. 168-170.
- 17 Ibid., p. 170.
- 18 Etienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 462.
- 19 Garrigou-La Grange, p. 167.
- 20 Gilson, p. 462.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 462.

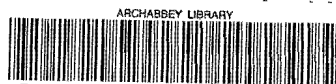
<sup>22</sup> Garrigou-La Grange, p. 167.

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