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**Identity and Real Distinction according to Duns Scotus**

Scotus’s theory of identity and distinction is a unique and central aspect of his thought, as he applies it throughout his metaphysics. On Scotus’s account of identity, the indiscernability of identicals fails—i.e., A and B can be identical but not share all the same properties. As Ockham objected, Scotus is now in the difficult position of needing to provide alternative necessary and sufficient conditions for being identical, rather than simply invoking indiscernability. The secondary literature has argued that the lack of actual or potential separation is both necessary and sufficient for identity. I argue that is incorrect and provide alternative necessary and sufficient conditions for identity and real distinction, along with an analysis of Scotus’s theory of identity and distinction more broadly. Scotus thinks instead that the lack of actual, potential, and proportional separation are necessary and sufficient conditions for identity. The deeper root of this view is that identity corresponds to a certain degree of unity, and is accompanied by a sharing of *esse*.

Consider a human and a donkey. They are both animals, but only one of them is rational. Human nature agrees with donkey nature in animality but disagrees in rationality. Animality and rationality are both essential features of human nature, as it answers to the definition *rational animal*. Moreover, according to the standard scholastic account, animality and rationality in human nature are identical to it and to each other. But if that’s the case, a problem arises: how can animality in human nature agree with donkey nature and yet rationality in human nature disagree with donkey nature if animality and rationality are identical? How can these contradictory predicates truly apply to identical items? You might think the tension can be resolved by drawing some sort of conceptual distinction between animality and rationality—even though animality and rationality are in fact identical in human nature, that we form distinct concepts of them allows us to diffuse the contradiction. Solutions of this sort are proposed by Henry of Ghent and Thomas Aquinas. John Duns Scotus, however, finds these solutions inadequate, and instead proposes something more radical: animality and rationality are identical and yet have some distinction between them *ex natura rei*—i.e., in reality, apart from our mode of conceiving it. This is his famous formal distinction, and he uses it to solve this problem since it allows him to have a metaphysics whereby the indiscernibility of identicals is false—even though animality and rationality are identical, there being some distinction between them *ex natura rei* allows for them to have to have differing and even contradictory properties.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Such a radical solution, however, raises an immediate problem for Scotus. Ockham was quick to note that, because Scotus rejects the indiscernibility of identicals, he cannot use it to determine whether two items are really distinct, as many philosophers do (Ockham, *Ordinatio*, d. 2 q. 6 n. 27 p. 156) Ockham’s challenge was for Scotus to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for real distinction.

The goal of this paper is to reconstruct Scotus’s theory of identity and real distinction. Scotus’s theory is noteworthy philosophically and historically for his rejection of the indiscernibility of identicals and for providing other criteria for identity. In addition, understanding Scotus’s theory of identity and distinction is indispensable for understanding his broader metaphysics given how often he invokes his idiosyncratic theory. For instance, the formal distinction holds between genera and differences, being and its attributes, the divine attributes, the powers of the soul, and the individuating *haecceity* and the common nature.[[2]](#footnote-2) Without an understanding of his theory of identity and distinction, his discussion of these topics will remain opaque. Further, the formal distinction and Scotus’s theory of identity and distinction more broadly are frequently discussed in subsequent scholastics from the 14th through the 18th century, and many developed their own theories of identity and distinction in dialogue with Scotus; it is difficult to understand these later thinkers without understanding Scotus on this issue. Moreover, there is a hole in the secondary literature on his theory of real distinction and identity, as most of the discussions of this occur in passing and are incorrect.

After giving (§I) an overview of Scotus’s formal distinction and the metaphysics that accompanies it, I argue (§II) against what is more or less the consensus opinion in the contemporary scholarship on what Scotus’s answer to Ockham’s challenge is, namely that actually or potential separation are necessary and sufficient for real distinction. Instead (§III), the presence of actual, potential, or proportional separation is a necessary and sufficient sign of real distinction. But how proportional separation is supposed to work is unclear, and, further, separability is only a sign of real distinction. Consequently, I first investigate what identity and real distinction consist in. I argue that for A and B to be identical is for them to have at least a certain grade of unity, and for A and B to be really distinct is for them to have less unity than that. And this grade of unity obtains, roughly, when A and B share esse, i.e., roughly, A and B are or are part of one essence.[[3]](#footnote-3) Using this analysis (§IV), I return to proportional separation, explaining it in light of the results of §III and showing how it reinforces the conclusions drawn there.

In order to begin our study of identity and real distinction, it will be helpful to begin with Scotus’s famous—or infamous—formal distinction.

1. Scotus’s General Theory of Distinctions and the Formal Distinction

As careful studies from Martin Tweedale, Richard Cross, and Michael Jordan have shown, Scotus’s doctrine of the formal distinction is largely consistent throughout his career; he develops his theory of the formal distinction over time, clarifying and refining it, including by changing the language he uses in order to express his position in clearer ways, but without substantially changing his view.[[4]](#footnote-4) As such, I will cite texts from throughout Scotus’s corpus, preferring later texts when possible.

For Scotus, identity obtains in three kinds cases: cases of formal identity, formal distinction, and modal distinction.[[5]](#footnote-5) In what follows, we’ll set aside the modal distinction, focusing on two kinds of cases of identity (*simpliciter*)—cases of formal identity and formal distinction—as well as the lack of identity, namely real distinction. The key term necessary to understanding the difference between formal identity and formal distinction is “*ratio*.” “*Ratio*” can mean different things in different contexts, and is variously translated as “nature,” “account,” or “real definition,” among others. For Scotus, one meaning of the term “*ratio”* is a certain conceptualization in the mind, namely the account or real definition of an item. Another meaning is the quiddity of an item, its intelligible structure which an item possesses independently of any operation of the intellect (Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I d. 8 p. 1 q. 4 n. 193 in Vat. IV, 261-262; *Quodl.* q.l n. 34 in Wadding-Vives XXV, p.35). *Ratio* in the second sense—its mind-independent quiddity—is expressed or captured by the *ratio* in the first sense. For instance, the *ratio* of man (in the second sense) is *rational animal*, its mind-independent quiddity, which is captured in our conceptualization *rational animal* (*ratio* in the first sense). The second sense of *ratio* is the more important one for our purposes, and talk of *rationes* in what follows should be understood in that way, unless otherwise specified.

Each part of the *ratio* of man is also a *ratio*, so *rational* and *animal* are both *rationes*. The *ratio* of a species is resolved into the *rationes* of a genus and difference, along the Porphyrean tree. The *ratio* of that genus can be further resolved into further *rationes* of genus and difference, until we hit the *ratio* of being, which along with the *rationes* of differences and the proper passions of being (such as goodness, truth, etc.), cannot be further resolved. The *rationes* of being, its proper passions, and differences are simple and irresolvable—in a strict Aristotelian sense, they cannot be defined, since they cannot be resolved into a genus and difference, but they still have a mind-independent *ratio*, by which, for example, *rationality* is distinct from horse difference.

Consider, then, Scotus’s characterization of the difference between formal identity and formal distinction (Scotus, *Reportatio,* I-A d. 33 q. 2, n. 63 in Wolter and Bychkov, 330): [[6]](#footnote-6)

however, it is said that some things do not have formal identity [i.e., are formally distinct] when one does not pertain to the per se and primary understanding of the other (as a definition or the parts of a definition pertain to the understanding of the thing defined), but when neither is included in the formal *ratio* of the other, although they are nevertheless really the same.

On Scotus’s account, if A and B are formally distinct or formally identical, they are identical (“really the same”). However, when there is identity but not formal identity (i.e., there is formal distinction), one of the things “does not pertain to the per se and primary understanding of the other” and “neither is included in the formal *ratio* of the other.” That is, the *ratio* of one is not included in the *ratio* of the other, *ex natura rei*. For example, human nature is formally identical to human nature, because the *ratio* which is *rational animal* is contained in *rational animal*. On the other hand, the formality of rationality has the *ratio* of rationality, and the formality of animality has the *ratio* of animality; rationality isn’t contained within the ratio of animality (otherwise all animals would be rational).

In light of all of this, Scotus’s account of formal identity and formal distinction is best characterized as follows:[[7]](#footnote-7)

FORMAL IDENTITY: A is formally identical to B iff 1) A and B are identical and 2) the *ratio* of B is included in the *ratio* of A.

FORMAL DISTINCTION: A is formally distinct from B iff 1) A and B are identical and 2) the *ratio* of B is not included in the *ratio* of A.

The metaphysics backing up the formal distinction and formal identity is important. Scotus argues that, corresponding to these diverse *rationes* within one species (e.g., *rational* and *animal* within human nature) there are diverse realities or formalities, as Scotus calls them.[[8]](#footnote-8) Formalities are extra-mental items which serve as the truthmakers for a nature having the various *rationes* that it does. So it is in virtue of the formality of *rationality* that human nature is rational, and that it contains rationality in its *ratio*. Scotus gives another example of a different genus and difference (*Ord.* I d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n. 407 in Vat. II, 358):

if whiteness is posited as a simple species not having in itself two natures, nevertheless there is some reality in whiteness whereby it has the *ratio* of color and something whereby it has the *ratio* of the difference; and this reality is not formally that reality [i.e., they are formally distinct], nor the converse formally. To the contrary, one is outside the reality of the other—speaking formally—just as if there were two things, though these two realities are simply one thing by identity.

So within whiteness, there is a formality of color (the genus) which serves as the truthmaker for this thing being a color. And there is a formality of the difference of whiteness which serves as the truthmaker for this thing not just being a color but being whiteness, e.g., instead of blueness. Scotus also highlights here that these formalities are *identical*. This is important—cases of formal distinction, and not only formal identity, are cases of true identity. Scotus elsewhere says that the identity had by formally distinct entities is “truly identity” (*Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n. 403 in Vat. II, 356-357). He adds that “real identity does not necessarily entail formal identity.”[[9]](#footnote-9) It is clear that, for Scotus, the identity corresponding to the formal distinction is identity *simpliciter*.

Establishing that the identity had by formally distinct items is truly identity is important because it makes clear Scotus’s denial of the indiscernibility of identicals.[[10]](#footnote-10) Many philosophers take it as an obvious truth that the indiscernibility of identicals holds. Scotus, however, does not: formally distinct formalities are identical, but have different properties. Shortly after the above quotation, Scotus says the formality of color is that by which whiteness agrees with blackness, but the formality of the difference of whiteness is *not* that by which whiteness agrees with blackness, despite the fact that they are identical (*Ord.* I d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n. 418 in Vat. II, 365). This is a failure of the indiscernibility of identicals. Similarly, Scotus argues extensively that, in the Godhead, paternity is not communicable but the divine essence is communicable, even though they are formally distinct and thus the same “by true identity” (*Ord*. I d. 2, part 2. q. 1 n. 379-399 in Vat. II, 345-355).

Though Scotus rejects the indiscernibility of identicals, he does think there are cases of identicals which are indiscernible: every case of two-way formal identity is a case of where identicals are indiscernible.[[11]](#footnote-11) For instance, Socrates is formally identical to Socrates and his animality is formally identical to his animality, and Socrates is identical and indiscernible from Socrates, as is his animality from his animality. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss Scotus’s reasons for thinking that not all cases of identity are cases of indiscernibility, but clearly one reason he posits the formal distinction is to allow for this.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Ockham was quick to note a problem with Scotus’s position. Ockham argues against the formal distinction, saying that if you accept the formal distinction (and thereby reject the indiscernibility of identicals), then (*Ord.* d. 2 q. 6 n. 27 p. 156, translation by Spade),

every way of proving a distinction of things would be lost in the case of creatures. For contradiction is the strongest way to prove the distinction of things. Therefore, if among creatures entirely the same thing can be truly denied of the same thing…and truly affirmed of it, no real distinction among them can be proved.

If A can be identical to B and yet have some property that B lacks, identical things can have contradictory properties. But if having contradictory properties isn’t a sure sign of real distinction, what is? This is Ockham’s challenge: how can we verify whether two things are really distinct if the indiscernibility of identicals fails?

1. The Standard View and Its Rejection

There is a fairly large consensus among scholars today as to how Scotus would respond to Ockham’s challenge. The standard reading of Scotus on real distinction and identity is that separability (i.e., that it is possible that A exists without B, or vice-versa) and its impossibility are the necessary and sufficient conditions for real distinction and identity, respectively. For example, Richard Cross writes (*The Physics of Scotus*, 8):

real inseparability (such that the real separation of two or more realities is *logically impossible*) is *necessary and sufficient* for real identity. Conversely, real separability is necessary and sufficient for real distinction. More precisely, two objects *x* and *y* are inseparable if and only if, both, it is not possible for *x* to exist without *y*, and it is not possible for *y* to exist without *x*; conversely, two objects *x* and *y* are separable if and only if at least one of *x* and *y* can exist without the other.

A similar line is taken by most people in the literature (Steele and Williams, “Complexity without Composition,” 7; King “Duns Scotus on Metaphysics”, 21-22; Connors “Scotus and Ockham”, 149; Wolter, *The Transcendentals*, 46; Tweedale *Scotus vs. Ockham*, 579).

There are a number of texts from Scotus which seem to support the interpretation given by defenders of the contemporary consensus. For instance, Scotus says, “for universally what agrees with something such that it would be in every way a contradiction that that be without this, this is really the same as that” (*Quodl.,* q. 3 n. 15 in Wadding-Vives XXV, 138). This seems to suggest that separability is a necessary condition for real distinction. Further, he says, “nothing is really the same as something without which it can really be without contradiction,” suggesting that separability is sufficient for real distinction (*Ord.* II d. 1 qq. 4–5, n. 200 in Vat. VII, 101).

Joshua Blander, however, has argued that this reading of Scotus is incorrect on both levels: separability is neither sufficient nor necessary for real distinction. He argues that separability cannot be sufficient for real distinction since there is identity between an individuated human nature and a person, and yet they are separable (“Same as it never was,” 245-246). That is, one and the same human nature can exist with and without the human person (Socrates’s nature is a person, but were it to be assumed by the Word, it would not be). This objection, however, fails; the nature and the person are identical, but they are not separable. This is because “person” simply signifies the nature with a two-told negation, namely the lack of any actual dependence and the lack of any habitual dependence on an extrinsic hypostasis (*Quodl.,* q. 19 n. 19 in Wadding-Vives XXVI, 288). As such, the person isn’t any positive being over and above the nature. It is true that the nature would cease to be a person *de dicto* if the Word were to hypostatically unite with it, but the nature would still be the same person *de re*. As such, the nature and the person are identical and inseparable *de re*. Thus, given the text from Scotus cited above which seemed to suggest that separability is sufficient for real distinction, accepting the consensus view that separability is indeed sufficient for real distinction is our best option.

Blander further argues that separability is not necessary for real distinction, because in the case of the Trinity, the three persons are inseparable but really distinct. This seems to me to be a good counterexample. After all, according to Christian orthodoxy, God is necessarily triune, so it is not possible for the persons to exist without each other. But also according to Christian orthodoxy, the persons are really distinct.[[13]](#footnote-13) So, separability cannot be necessary for real distinction. I will add two more counterexamples. First, as Scotus himself notes, the heavenly bodies are inseparable from their motion and their opacity but they are really distinct (*Ord.* II d. 1 q. 5 n. 265 in Vat. VII, 132 and *QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 153 in *Opera Philosophica* III, 358, respectively). Second, according to Scotus, as he holds to a monadic theory of relations, the similarity relation of Socrates to Plato exists iff the similarity relation of Plato to Socrates exists, so they are not separable.[[14]](#footnote-14) But neither are they identical. Therefore, being actually or potentially separate is not a necessary condition of real distinction. Consequently, we will have to look elsewhere for the necessary conditions for real distinction, if Scotus is to have an adequate response to Ockham’s objection.

1. Identity and Real Distinction

In Scotus’s discussion of the formal distinction in the *Ordinatio*, he gives what I think is the clearest exposition of what it is to be identical and really distinct.[[15]](#footnote-15) After explaining the nature of the formal distinction in different ways, he proceeds to describe it “most properly:”

Just as we can find many grades in unity—first, the least grade is of aggregation… in the fourth there is the *per se* unity of a composite from its essential principles per se actually and *per se* potentially; in the fifth grade there is the unity of simplicity, which is true identity (for whatever is there is really the same with anything there, and not only is it one with this [item] by unity of union, as in the other modes)—thus, further still, not every identity is formal. But I call formal identity [a case of identity] where that which is called the same in this way includes that to which it is thus the same in its formal quidditative *ratio* and does so *per se* in the first mode [of *perseity*].[[16]](#footnote-16)

It is striking that, in a passage where he claims to be explicating the formal distinction “most properly,” he talks about grades of unity. But this should not be too surprising, as he is following the traditional Aristotelean idea that identity and distinction are simply different grades of unity.[[17]](#footnote-17) The fifth grade is the grade corresponding to the formal distinction, and it is “truly identity.” It is at this grade of unity, the unity of simplicity, that A and B are not united in a union of two really distinct things (unlike the fourth grade, where matter and form compose one substance but are nevertheless really distinct, and *a fortiori* unlike the grades with lower unity), but instead the unity between A and B is so great that they are identical. And there is a still higher grade of unity which is formal identity, of which Scotus gives the same definition as quoted above; at this grade of unity, not only are A and B identical, but also B is included in the formal *ratio* of A. In summary, for A and B to be identical just is for A and B to have at least the unity of simplicity, and for A and B to be really distinct is for A and B to have less unity than the unity of simplicity.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is right as far as it goes, but unfortunately this analysis is not very illuminating—it doesn’t help to practically answer Ockham’s challenge. How can we tell what the grade of unity between two items is?

A clue appears in a cryptic remark that Scotus makes in response to Henry of Ghent. Henry defends the position that an angel requires something really distinct from it to measure the duration of its existence in order to exist. Scotus objects to Henry’s position by arguing that the thing measuring the duration of the angel’s existence would end up being identical to the angel, and so Henry’s position is false. In discussing whether the thing measuring the duration of the angel’s existence is identical to the angel Scotus says, “therefore I accept that nothing can be concluded ‘distinct from another’ except because of actual separation, potential separation, or because of a proportion of them to some other things, one of which is separable from the other” (*Ord.* II, d. 2, p. 1, q. 2, n. 94 in Vat. VII, 198). There are two things to note here. The first is that not only can we conclude real distinction from actual and potential separation, but also from a proportion or similarity of A and B to another M and N where M and N are actually or potentially separate (call this “proportional separation”). The standard reading of Scotus has only focused on actual and potential separation, whereby two things are actually or potentially separate iff one can exist without the other; it was this that was shown to not be necessary for real distinction. But here, we see a third option in Scotus: proportional separation. Although it is not obvious what this is, by gathering evidence from various places in his work, we can arrive at a more precise understanding of what proportional separation consists in.

The second note to make is that actual separation, potential separation, and proportional separation are the three ways to *conclude* that there is a real distinction. Real distinction does not *consist* in these kinds of separation (but rather in a certain lack of unity). Instead, they are the epistemological signs or markers of it. More evidence for this is that Scotus presents an argument that actual and potential separation entail real distinction, wherein the fact that the actually or potentially separate things are really distinct is explained by something other than their mere actual or potential separation. It is reasonable to think that whatever explains why actually or potentially separate things are really distinct is itself a deeper explanation of real distinction. It would thus be helpful, before we investigate how proportional separation functions, to first try to explain why actually and potentially separate things are really distinct. In a fuller version of a quotation cited above, Scotus offers such an explanation in the context of arguing that there are many relations that are really distinct from their foundations. He says (*Ord.* II d. 1, q. 5 n. 200-201 in Vat. VII, 101-102):

nothing is really the same as something without which it can really exist with no contradiction; but there are many relations whose foundations can really exist without them with no contradiction; therefore, there are many relations which are not really the same as their foundation. Proof of the major: because that “same being” would really be and really not be seems to be opposed to the first principle [i.e., of non-contradiction], from which first principle the diversity of things seems to be immediately concluded; because if contradictories are said of some things, these things seem not to be the same in the way which the contradictories are said of them, and thus if the contradictories “to be” (*esse*) and “not to be” (*non esse*) are said of them, they seem not to be the same in *esse* or in reality, or not to be the same being (*ens*).

At first, this seems to be a straightforward application of the indiscernibility of identicals to establish real distinction. However, a closer look reveals a more subtle move from the Subtle Doctor. Notice that he says, “if contradictories are said of some things, these things seem not to be the same *in the way in which the contradictories are said of them.*” He then reasons that since the contradictories are specifically “to be” and “not to be,” it follows that the things are really distinct. I think Scotus has the following in mind. Items can be identical and yet have contradictories said of them. But those items, despite being identical, are not the same *in the way in which the contradictories are said of them.*

Let’s take an example. As mentioned, Scotus holds that in a human being, rationality and animality are formally distinct, so they are identical but contradictories can be truly said of them; animality in Socrates really agrees with donkey nature, but rationality in Socrates really disagrees with donkey nature. So animality and rationality in Socrates are not the same in agreeing with donkey nature; they differ in this way *ex natura rei*. Yet this does not entail that rationality and animality in Socrates are really distinct. Such a move can be made with many contradictory predicates, but not with “to be” and “not to be.”[[19]](#footnote-19) For if one item is and the other is not, then, as he says, it follows that they are not the same in *esse*.[[20]](#footnote-20) But if they are not the same in *esse*, they are not the same being (*ens*) and thus lack the unity of simplicity. So, they are really distinct. Thus, a real distinction holds between those items which are not the same in *esse*, whereas the formal distinction is a distinction between aspects of a thing which share in *esse*. And since the two items in our example are not the same in *esse*, they are really distinct.

Returning, then, to Scotus’s discussion of actual and potential separation, it seems that if A and B are actually or potentially separate, they are really distinct *because* they would then have diverse *esse*. And this, I claim, is basically what Scotus thinks: A and B are really distinct iff they have diverse *esse*. Taking the contrapositives, this logically entails that A and B are identical (i.e., not really distinct) iff they do not differ in *esse*.

It should be noted here that Scotus recognizes both the being of existence (*esse exsistentiae*) and the being of essence (*esse essentiae*).[[21]](#footnote-21) Scotus says that *esse exsistentiae* is subdivided into *esse subsistentiae* and *esse inexsistentiae*, where the former denotes a kind of independent being that supposits have, whereas the latter denotes a kind of dependent being characteristic of accidents (*Lec*. III d. 6 q. 1 n. 29 in Vat. XX, 177. See also, *Ord*. III d.6 q. 1 n. 8-10 in Vat. IX, 31*)*. Unlike Aquinas, Scotus thinks that *esse exsistentiae* and *esse essentiae* aren’t really distinct—the essence of a being is its existence, and vice-versa.[[22]](#footnote-22) Whether there is a formal or modal distinction between them is unimportant for our purposes (and, indeed, Scotus himself seems relatively unconcerned with this question), so I’ll simply refer to it as *esse* *exsistentiae/essentiae*. In any event, items have the same *esse* *exsistentiae/essentiae*, basically, just in case they are the same essence or are parts of the same essence, whereas items have diverse *esse* *exsistentiae/essentiae* just in case they neither are nor are part of the same essence.[[23]](#footnote-23) And to be the same essence or to be part of the same essence is to have at least the unity of simplicity, since it is a higher grade of unity than the union of matter and form in a substance (the fourth grade (*Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n 403 in Vat. II, 356-357)). So my claim is this: [[24]](#footnote-24)

IDENTITY: A and B are identical iff A and B have at least the unity of simplicity iff A and B do not differ with respect to *esse exsistentiae/essentiae* (i.e., A and B are or are part of the same essence and do not differ with respect to subsistence).

And:

REAL DISTINCTION: A and B are really distinct iff A and B have less unity than the unity of simplicity iff A and B differ with respect to *esse exsistentiae/essentiae (*i.e., A and B neither are nor are part of the same essence or they differ with respect to subsistence).

What identity and distinction *are* is spelled out by the first biconditional in each—the presence or absence of some unity. I have argued for that above. The second biconditionals are metaphysically equivalent formulations which serve to make clearer those cases where the unity of simplicity obtains or does not.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The second biconditionals of IDENTITY and REAL DISTINCTION seems to me to be suggested by the above passage where Scotus explains why actually or potentially separate beings are really distinct, as he offers things’ differing in *esse* as an explanation for their real distinction. Now, I’ll provide more evidence for the second biconditionals of IDENTITY and REAL DISTINCTION. Since they are contrapositives, I do not need to offer independent evidence for each; however, since both are biconditionals, I’ll need to offer evidence for each conditional separately. First, I’ll proffer evidence for the right to left conditional of IDENTITY and the equivalent left to right conditional of REAL DISTINCTION, namely that A and B are identical if A and B do not differ with respect to *esse exsistentiae/essentiae* (i.e., A and B are or are part of the same essence and do not differ with respect to subsistence) and that if A and B are really distinct then they differ with respect to *esse exsistentiae/essentiae (*i.e., A and B neither are nor part of the essence or they differ with respect to subsistence).

The first piece of evidence comes from Scotus’s discussion defending the view that Christ has a created *esse* in addition to an uncreated *esse*. In the course of his discussion, he says, “the existence of my foot is not the existence of me, though it is in me, because I am not my foot, nor subsisting with respect to my foot” (*Ord.* III d. 6 q. 1 n. 36 in Vat. IX, 242-243). The implication is that if my foot and I had the same *esse*, we would be identical.[[26]](#footnote-26) So we see that, for Scotus, identity is a necessary condition for having diverse *esse*.

A second piece of evidence comes from his late *Lectura* III commentary. Scotus is defending the view that the divine essence itself can be hypostatically united immediately to a human nature (in contrast to the Word being immediately hypostatically to a human nature, as Scotus thinks is in fact the case). He raises an objection against himself that if the divine essence were hypostatically united to a human essence, the united thing would be “one in essence” (which consequent he takes to be false). He responds that the divine essence would merely be the terminus of the human essence’s dependence relation, and they would not be one in essence since, “‘to be one in essence’ by its mode of signifying is taken as a unity of identity” (*Lec*. III d. 1 q. 2 n. 122 in Vat. XX, 47). So, very explicitly, being one is essence (i.e., sharing in *esse exsistentiae/essentiae*) is sufficient for identity (and a kind of unity, namely the unity of identity).

Thirdly, Scotus’s discussion of unitive containment supports this interpretation. “Unitive containment” is term Scotus uses to describe the relation one item has to its diverse formalities which serve as the truthmakers for its having the *ratio* it has.[[27]](#footnote-27) For example, human nature unitively contains the formalities of animality and rationality, and animality unitively contains living and sensitive (its genus and difference), and so on, until being and its attributes are reached.[[28]](#footnote-28) Scotus is clear that the relation between things unitively contained among themselves and with their container (e.g., the species) is formal distinction (*Ord*. IV d. 46 q. 3 n. 74 in Vat. XIV, 217):

those things are not unitively contained which are contained without any distinction, because union is not without all distinction. Nor are things unitively contained which are contained really distinctly *simpliciter*, because they are contained multiply or sporadically. Therefore, this word ‘unitively’ includes some kind of distinction of the things contained which suffices for union, and nevertheless suffices for such a union which is repugnant to every composition and aggregation of distinct things; this cannot be the case unless a formal non-identity with real identity is posited.

So, really distinct things cannot be unitively contained, and neither can formally identical things. Instead, those things which are unitively contained are formally distinct from each other and with that which contains them.[[29]](#footnote-29) Further, it is clear that Scotus thinks that unitive containment happens within an essence—that is, it is an essence or a formality within an essence that unitively contains the formalities under it.[[30]](#footnote-30) As such, those items unitively contained within an essence (which is just to share *esse essentiae/exsistentiae*) are identical.

The left to right conditional of IDENTITY and the equivalent right to left conditional of REAL DISTINCTION state that if A is identical to B then A and B do not differ in *esse exsistentiae/essentiae* (i.e., A and B are or are part of the same essence and do not differ with respect to subsistence) and equivalently that if A and B differ with respect to *esse exsistentiae/essentiae (*i.e., A and B neither are nor part of the essence or they differ with respect to subsistence), then A and B are really distinct. We have seen the first piece of evidence for this conditional, as it seems to be assumed in his argument cited above that things that are actually or potentially separate are really distinct.

A second piece of evidence comes from Scotus’s Trinitarian theology. We can see that *esse subsistentiae* can serve as the root of a real distinction by looking at the case of the Trinity. Scotus responds to a simple transitivity of identity argument against the Trinity, i.e., each person is identical to the essence, therefore they’re identical to each other. Scotus answers, “I say that the essence does not have such a unique identity of subsistence as much as the persons or personal [properties] are united in the essence as extremes, and thus an identity of subsistences or of subsistence cannot be concluded by reason of the identity of them in essence as in a middle term” (*Ord.* I d. 2 q. 4, n. 414 in Vat. II, 363). So we cannot infer the identity of the Persons because they have distinct subsistences; this suggests that the persons are distinct *because* they have distinct subsistences or *esse subsistantiae*. Scotus is even more explicit in another text. When discussing the relations of *being produced* in the context of the Trinity, Scotus argues that if A and B have distinct *being produced* relations, A and B must be really distinct (unlike with the relation of *producer*, because one being can have two distinct *producer* relations if it produces two things). Referring to the *being produced* relations, he says, “they are personally distinct, because the produced is *per se* subsistent and a supposit” (*Ord.* I d. 2 q. 4, n. 373 in Vat. II, 343). Again, he suggests the Persons are really distinct *because* they have diverse subsistences.

A third piece of evidence comes from Scotus’s late “Quaestio de Formalitatibus.” Scotus himself asks the very question we are interested in: “whence is it that some such [formal] actualities are the same unitively, and others not?” (455-456 p. 176.) The formal actualities he is referring to are the formalities; moreover, recall that things that are the same unitively are identical (and formally distinct). He answers, “I respond: beyond the same by aggregation and the same *per accidens*, something can be said to be the same essentially where there is only one essence, and this simply or composed from principles making it one *per se*” (“Quaestio de Formalitatibus,” 456-459, p. 176-177). So, if A and B are the same unitively (and thus identical), they are the same essence or are “principles” of the same essence (i.e., parts of the same essence).[[31]](#footnote-31)

Scotus’s immediately elucidates his answer by explaining that some formalities are compossible together in the same simple essence but others are not so compossible, and he explains that this is due simply to what each formality is. Scotus lists the same criteria for two items to be distinguished *simpliciter* mentioned above and proceeds to speak of the last one, namely “non-identity,” which is what we are interested in:[[32]](#footnote-32)

(i) incompossibility of actuality to actuality completes non-identity *simpliciter*…, not as incompossibility of contraries but incompossibility in the same indivisible thing…. (ii)And if you were to ask how this actuality is incompossible with this simple thing in some things and not in other things, I respond: the extreme simples themselves simply are compossibles with the whole if they are compossibles, and they themselves are incompossibles with the whole if they are incompossibles; (iii) therefore, paternity is compossible with deity because paternity is paternity and deity is deity, (iv) as in other things whiteness and humanity are incompossible in the same simple because humanity is humanity and whiteness is whiteness, but they are not incompossible in one thing *per accidens*.

So, (i) real distinction is an incompossibility to be in one and the same indivisible thing (an essence). Some things (ii) are such that they are compossible in one essence *per se* and others are such that they cannot be, simply because of what they are. For example, (iii) the formality of paternity is compossible with deity to be in the Father, whereas (iv) whiteness and humanity can only be united *per accidens* (the third grade of unity mentioned in *Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n 403 in Vat. II, 356-357) and not with the unity of simplicity. Two formalities that are identical, then, do not differ in *esse existentiae/essentiae*, because they are or are part of the same essence (and do not differ in subsistence).

The above quotation also sheds light on how to respond to the objection that IDENTITY and REAL DISTINCTION must be wrong because they are circular, since they include seeming identity-involving terms such as “differ” and “same,” which is exactly what we are trying to explain. What is the criterion for whether essence C and essence D do not differ in *esse exsistentiae/essentiae*? It seems to me that Scotus can say that the indiscernibility of identicals holds between essences, and so he can use that to determine whether one essence is identical to another. This is due to the difference between essence and the formalities which are parts of essence. Formalities which are parts of an essence stand in act-potency relation to each other (genus to difference) and are such that they are capable of having the unity of simplicity with other formalities (*Ord*. I d. 8 p. 1 q. 3 n. 103, 106 in Vat. IV, 200-202). Essences, in contrast, do not stand in act-potency relation to other essences for having the unity of simplicity (there is an (i) “incompossiblity of actuality to actuality” instead of the composibility which is the potency-to-act relation), but (iv) only for a unity *per accidens*. This is simply a difference between essences, such as humanity and whiteness, and formalities within an essence or subsistent thing, such as deity and paternity. And because only the unity of simplicity allows for violations of the indiscernibility of identicals and essences cannot have the unity of simplicity with each other, the indiscernibility of identicals will hold between essences. So, Scotus can use the indiscernibility of identicals to distinguish essences, and then can answer the question of whether two formalities are identical by seeing whether they are part of the same essence or subsistent thing.

It will be helpful to summarize the metaphysics at play in cases of identity. For the sake of simplicity, we’ll stick to a creaturely case: individual essences (e.g., Socrates’s human nature, this whiteness accident, etc.), unitively contain formalities with the *rationes* of their genus and difference, i.e., the essence contains the formalities with the *rationes* of its genus and difference as quasi-parts, which serve as the truthmakers for the essence having the essential, Porphyrian features that it has (e.g., being a rational animal or a white color). Further, in creaturely contexts, the things unitively contained “are made the same because of the perfection of the container.”[[33]](#footnote-33) So, it is because of the perfection of humanity that it unitively contains—and is thus identical to—animality and rationality, as well the explanation why animality and rationality are identical to each other. The formality of the genus also univitely contains the formalities with the *rationes* corresponding to its genus and difference (e.g., the formality of animal contains the genus and difference of *living thing* and *sensitive*). This continues up the Porphyrian tree until we reach being and substance (these are not strictly a genus and difference, but they practically function as genus and difference do in this case). These formalities also are distinct property bearers in their own right (though not the bearers of categorial accidents). By their own nature, the formality of each genus and difference (as well as *being* and the difference of substance) stands in potency and act relations to each other, genus to difference, as parts of the species, such that they are compatible at least with the unity of simplicity. Because of this, they are identical to the species and to each other. They also all share in one *esse exsistentiae/essentiae*, since each essence only has one *esse exsistentiae/essentiae.* Essences, however, are not the sort of things that by their nature stand in potency to other things such that they can be united to them with the unity of simplicity, but only unity *per accidens* (as Socrates may be in potency to stand to the accident of pallor with accidental unity but not the unity of simplicity). Because the indiscernibility of identicals only fails in cases where A and B have the unity of simplicity, the indiscernibility of identicals applies to essences and can be used to determine whether they are really distinct. And because it is metaphysically necessary that all cases of identity are cases involving essences or parts of essence (i.e., either of the essence with itself, the essence with a formality, or a formality with a formality), the unity of simplicity, sharing *esse exsistentiae/essentiae,* and being the same essence or part of the same essence are each a necessary and sufficient condition for identity, as all obtain in an essence. *Mutatis Mutandis* for real distinction.[[34]](#footnote-34)

If I’m right about this analysis of identity and real distinction, some questions still remain. We began with Scotus’s discussion of actual, potential, and proportional separation. We have seen how actual and potential separation are sufficient conditions for real distinction given this view, but what about proportional separation? If I’m right, proportional separation should fit with IDENTITY and REAL DISTINCTION.

1. Proportional Separability

We return, then, to proportional separability. We saw earlier the general line of thought Scotus wants to use: if A stands to B as M stands to N and M and N are actually or potentially separate, then A and B are proportionally separate and really distinct too. He explains this thought in more detail in his *Questions on the Metaphysics*. After explaining that unitive containment involves the identity of the item contained with the container, he raises an objection against himself saying that if his doctrine of univitive containment were correct, nothing would be perfected by a distinct essence, e.g., Socrates would not be perfected by the accident of wisdom really distinct from him, but he would unitively contain wisdom (*QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 143, 152 in *Opera Philosophica* III, 354-355, 357). In response, Scotus says that actual and potential separation imply that there are distinct essences, but actual and potential inseparability are not sufficient for identity. If A and B are neither actually nor potentially separate, before concluding they are identical, “it should be considered if something of the same *ratio* is elsewhere, and if it is an accident there, then it is an accident here.”[[35]](#footnote-35) He gives an example of the form of a circle, gold, wood, and the form of a triangle; suppose that the form of circle was neither actually nor potentially separate from gold (and consequently that all circles were made of gold). Nevertheless, we should not conclude that the form of a circle is identical to gold because “figure in a genus stands to sensible matter in a genus as a circle stands to this matter—namely gold—and as whatever other figure stands to its matter. But wood is not of the essence of a triangle. Therefore, similarly neither is gold of the essence of a circle. We would grant that there is proportionality” (*QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 153 in *Opera Philosophica* III, 357-358). So there is a proportional similarity: the form of a circle stands to gold as the form of a triangle stands to wood. But the form of a triangle stands to wood as its accidental arrangement, potentially separate and really distinct from it. Therefore, the form of a circle stands to gold in the same way—both pairs stand as a figure in the accidental genus of quantity stands to sensible matter in the genus of substance, and because a real distinction obtains in the one case, it must obtain in the other.

So, by noticing a proportion between two actually or potentially inseparable items with two items which are actually or potentially separate, we can conclude that the former pair is really distinct.[[36]](#footnote-36) In sum, then:

INSEPARABILITY: A and B are identical iff A and B are not actually, potentially, or proportionally separate.

SEPARABILITY: A and B are really distinct iff A and B are either actually, potentially, or proportionally separate.

Scotus’s discussions of separation lend credence to IDENTITY and REAL DISTINCTION. The objection that Scotus is responding to in the above passage suggests that Socrates unitively contains all of his properties in his essence. Scotus responds by using actual, potential, and proportional separation to show that Socrates is really perfected by another essence which he does not unitively contain, and he also thinks that the three kinds of separation are jointly necessary and each sufficient signs of real distinction; this close parallel in the treatment of essence, unitive containment, and real distinction is exactly what we would expect to see given IDENTITY and REAL DISTINCTION.

Scotus thus has his response to Ockham’s challenge: he can use either IDENTITY and REAL DISTINCTION or INSEPARABILITY and SEPARABILITY.[[37]](#footnote-37) He offers the latter pair, it seems to me, because they are easier criteria or signs to mark out identity and real distinction than those offered by the former, even if the former are more explanatory.

Given IDENTITY or INSEPARABILITY, some of the logical properties of identity become clear. Identity is symmetrical and reflexive but not transitive. It is symmetrical, since all of the criteria for identity need to apply to both A and B for them to be identical.[[38]](#footnote-38) It is reflexive, since A and A meet all of the criteria for identity. Identity is not transitive, because there could be a case where A has the unity of simplicity with B and B has the unity of simplicity with C, but where A lacks the unity of simplicity with C, so A and C are not identical.[[39]](#footnote-39) Scotus thinks the Father, the divine essence, and the Son are like this.

1. Conclusion

Scotus thinks that the indiscernibility of identicals is false, and so developed a complicated theory of identity and distinction to use in his metaphysics instead. Formal distinction and formal identity are two cases where identity obtains, and as such they are distinct kinds of unity. The difference between them is that in a case where A is formally distinct from B, the *ratio* of *B* is not contained in the *ratio* of *A,* but if A is formally identical to B, then the *ratio* of B is contained in the *ratio* of A. In cases of two-way formal identity, the indiscernibility of identicals holds, but not in any case involving formal distinction. As such, Scotus cannot use the indiscernibility of identicals as the necessary and sufficient condition for identity. Scotus instead thinks that for A and B to be identical is to have at least a certain grade of unity, the unity of simplicity, and to be really distinct is to have less unity than that. A and B have least the unity of simplicity iff they do not differ in *esse exsistentiae/essentiae*. *Mutatis mutandis* for real distinction. Scotus’s theory involves a metaphysics of formalities, which are property bearers with *rationes* corresponding to the genera and differences of an essence, and they stand as quasi-parts (genus and difference) to the quasi-whole (the species) which unitively contains them. They serve as the truthmakers for the essence or formality which unitively contains them having the essential, Porphyrean properties that it has, preserving the robust isomorphism between mind and reality that is characteristic of Scotus’s thought, as each distinct concept of a genus and difference represents a formally distinct property-bearer in the world.

This theory is doubtless complicated, and it beyond the scope of this paper to unpack *why* Scotus has this view. But first it is important to simply understand what the view is. This allows us to understand Scotus on his own terms whenever he employs his theory of identity and distinction across his metaphysics, as he frequently does. It also allows us to understand (the very many) thinkers who consciously develop their own theory of identity and distinction in dialogue with Scotus. Further, Scotus’s theory should perhaps make us reconsider the view, often taken for granted, that the concept of identity *just is* the concept of the indiscernibility of identicals—surely there is something attractive about this thought, but, as Scotus and his followers show, this is by no means a foregone conclusion, taken for granted by all philosophers. Scotus’s theory of identity and distinction, then, helps us understand Scotus, later thinkers who engage with him, the history of theories of identity and distinction, and perhaps even provide insights for theories of identity and distinction today.[[40]](#footnote-40)

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1. By “the indiscernibility of identicals,” I mean the principle whereby, for any A and B, if A and B are identical, then if A is F, B is F. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ord.* I d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n. 407 in Vat. II, 358), *QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 143 in *Opera Philosophica*. III, 354-355, *Ord*. I d. 8, p. 1, q. 4 n. 192 in Vat. VI, 192, *Rep*. II d. 16 q. 1 n. 18-19 in Wadding-Vives XXIII, 75), and *Ord*. II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 6, n. 188 in Vat. VII, 483-484, respectively. The modal distinction is also important for Scotus, but is beyond the scope of this paper. See, however, Grajewski, *The Formal Distinction*, 81-87 and Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 426-429. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Unless otherwise specified, “essence” should be understood to mean an individuated essence. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cross “Scotus on Divine Simplicity”; Tweedale, *Scotus vs Ockham*, p. 509-510; Jordan, “Scotus on the Formal Distinction”, p. 218-226, following his close analysis in 41-137. Earlier work by Adams (“Ockham on Identity”) and Gelber (“Logic and the Trinity”) disagree with this conclusion. Although Adams and Gelber have some disagreements between them, they both hold that Scotus earlier in his career had a more realist doctrine which posited distinct formalities or property bearers corresponding to the formally distinct items, but that later in his career Scotus rejected this view, whereas the other authors mentioned argue that he held to the distinct property bearers view throughout his career. This article primarily concerns real distinction and identity rather than specifically the formal distinction, so I will not dwell on this point, but Adams and Gelber’s arguments are to my mind sufficiently answered by the above authors and Dumont (“Scotus’s Parisian Question”). Instead, Scotus’s distinction—whether he calls it virtual, formal non-identity, or formal distinction—functions similarly throughout his career and does involve distinct formalities or property bearers, as Cross, Tweedale, and Jordan argue. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scotus seems to suggest that the identity had between an intrinsic mode and what it is a mode of it different from a formal distinction in *Ord*. I d. 8 q. 3 n. 108, 136 in Vat. IV, 202-203, 221, but this would require another paper to defend. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This account essentially agrees with Cross (*The Physics of Scotus,* 149), Adams (“Ockham on Identity,”35), Steele and Williams (“Complexity without Composition,” 8), and King (”Duns Scotus on Metaphysics,” 22-23) that the two defining features of formal distinction are identity and whether the *ratio* of one is contained in the *ratio* of the other or not, respectively. Many of the Scotists (as reported by Mastri in *Cursus Philosophicus* d. 6 q. 11 n. 208 p. 294) have a similar account too. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ord.* I d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n. 407 in Vat. II, 358 and *Ord*. I d. 5 p. 1 q. 1 n. 19 in Vat. IV, 18-19. He argues for this in *QMet.* VII, q. 19, n. 43-57 in *Opera Philosophica* IV, 370-374). I take “formality” and “reality” to be two names for the same item. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n. 408 in Vat. II, 358. I take real identity to simply be identity, and Scotus is using the term “real” to highlight that the identity is genuine and *simpliciter* rather than *secundum quid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. King (“Scotus on Metaphysics,” 9) agrees that Scotus rejects the indiscernibility of identicals. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I say “two-way” because formal identity and formal distinction are not symmetric relations (see *Rep.* I-A d. 33 q. 3 n. 90 in Wolter and Bychkov, 338). Further, formal identity is reflexive (since A is formally identical to A) and transitive (since if B is contained in the *ratio* of A and C is contained in the *ratio* of B, then C is contained in the ratio of A), but not symmetrical (since A can be formally identical to B, but B can be formally distinct from A). Further, formal distinction is neither symmetrical, reflexive, nor transitive. Two-way formal identity logically functions are identity does in most contemporary views: it is symmetrical, reflexive, and transitive. The logical properties of identity itself will be discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a careful treatment of one of Scotus’s arguments for the formal distinction, see Novák, “Qui Melius Scit Exponere.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. If the persons were not really distinct, they would be identical, which is the heresy of Sabellianism. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Questions on Aristotle’s Categories* q. 27 n. 12 p. 232-233: “It must be said that all relatives that essentially (per se) refer to each other so that the being of one is to have itself to another and vice versa, are simultaneous by nature[…]. Since if one is posited, the remaining one is posited, and the other way around, and if one is destroyed, the remaining is also destroyed, and the other way around” (translation by Newton). The same question makes clear that the relations are nevertheless really distinct. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There is another passage worth mentioning here to clear up potential confusion. Scotus lists four conditions for two things to be “distinguished *simpliciter*” in *Rep.* I-A d. 33 q. 2 n. 60 in Wolter and Bychkov, 328): (1) they must be in act, (2) have formal being and not virtual being (as a cause virtually contains its effect), (3) have existence which isn’t confused (like items in a mixture), and (4) “non-identity.” Condition (4) is what we are investigating in this paper, since here he is just referring to real distinction. If condition 4 is met but not the others, the real distinction will be qualified but nevertheless be a real distinction (e.g., wine and water in a mixture are really distinct substances, but their distinction is qualified). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 2, q. 4, n 403 in Vat. II, 356-357). For more on this passage, see Cross (“Scotus on Essence”, 176-178), Tweedale (*Scotus vs. Ockham*, 501-502), and Duba (*The Forge of Doctrine*, 178-185). See also, *Lec*. I d. 2 p. 2 q. 1 n. 275 in Vat. XVI, 216). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, Aristotle says that things “are said to be the same intrinsically and in as many ways as things are said to be one” (*Metaphysics* V, 1018a 4-5). Similarly, regarding distinction he says: “things are said to be distinct when either their forms or their matter or the account of their substance are more than one” (*Metaphysics* V, 1018a 9-10), translations by Reeve. For more on how identity is grounded in unity in the scholastic tradition, see Klima, “Being, Unity, and Identity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Scotus also talks about the “unity of identity,” (e.g., *Ord*. III d. 1 p. 1. Q.2 n. 120 in Vat. IX, 54-55 and *Lec*. III d. 1 q. 2 n. 122 in Vat. XX, 47) further highlighting that identity is a kind of unity. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a discussion of the various ways that something can be said to not be, see *Ord*. I d. 36 n. 58-63 in Vat. VI, 294-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A few paragraphs after the one under discussion, he adds: “just as a contradiction stated of things is a way of proving distinction, so an impossibility of receiving a predication of contradictories pertaining to *esse* is the way of proving identity in *esse*—and this where there is not an essential dependence which requires a manifest distinction.” *Ord.* II d. 1 q. 5 n. 262 in Vat. VII, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Roughly, *esse exsistentiae* is that by which something exists, while *esse essentiae* is “the-what-it-is-to-be of the thing” (*Lec*. III d. 6 q. 1 n. 29 in Vat. XX, 177), the being which makes the thing to be the kind of thing that it is. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Scotus says, “for I do not know this fiction that *esse* is something supervening on essence.” *Ord*. IV, d. 11, p. 1, q. 2, a. 1, n. 251 in Vatican XII, 255). See also, Cross, “Scotus on Essence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I say “basically” because the Trinity adds a complication. The Trinity, as we will see below, has one *esse essentiae* and three *esse subsistentiae*. This is not an exception to denial of the real distinction between *esse essentiae* and *esse exsistentiae* though, since the three *esse subsistentiae* are each identical to the one *esse essentiae*, just as the Persons are identical with the divine essence. But in creatures, everything with an *esse essentiae* has exactly one accompanying *esse exsistentiae*. When I say “part of the same essence,” I take parthood in the way that animality is said to be a part of the essence of humanity. This is unlike a normal mereological relation since the parts (animality and rationality) are identical to each other and to the whole (humanity). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. It should be added that the *esse* needn’t be actual *esse*, but can be merely possible. Scotus admits that a distinction between items where at least one is in potency will be distinguished in a qualified way (namely, *qua* in potency), but they will still be really distinct, as they are non-identical (*Rep.* I-A d. 33 q. 2 n. 60-61 in Wolter and Bychkov, 328-329). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Many of the Scotists interpreted Scotus similarly to me, in that they thought identical items share *esse* and really distinct items don’t. See, e.g. Mastri, *Cursus Philosophicus* d. 6 q. 8 n. 175 p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. An anonymous review raised a worry here about how this fits with Scotus’s doctrine of the plurality of substantial form and his thought that there is in some sense one *esse* for a composite substance, as in *Ord*. IV d. 11 n. 250-254 in Vat. XII, 255-256. On Scotus’s view as outlined in that text and immediately following the given quotation, distinct parts of the composite substance have distinct, partial *esse* which relate quasi-mereologically to form one complete *esse* for the substance. So indeed in one sense Socrates has one *esse*, and nevertheless his one *esse* is really distinct from the *esse* of one of his parts, just as a whole is in a sense one despite being really distinct from its parts. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “Relation” here and in what follows is to be taken very broadly, not as a categorial relation. For more on unitive containment, see Steele and Williams, “Complexity without Composition,” 11-14 and Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 422-426. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In unitive containment, the more determinate item contains the less determinate rather than the other way around. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Scotus also affirms this in a late addition to his *QMet*, IV q. 2 n. 143-144 in *Opera Philosophica* III, 354-355). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In *Rep*. II d. 16 q. 1 n. 18 in Wadding-Vives XXIII, 74-75, Scotus says that there are two kinds of unitive containment. The first is “as an inferior contains essential superiors and there the contents are of the essence of the container, just as it is the same reality from which the difference and proximate genus in whiteness is taken, as color and sensible quality and quality and however much there would be other things [*quamquam essent res aliae*], they would [all] be contained unitively in whiteness.” So, in this kind of unitive containment, an essence is the container for the thing unitively contained. The other kind of unitive containment, which is not important for our purposes, is how being contains its convertible properties. See also *QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 143, 159 in *Opera Philosophica*. III, 354-355, 360). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Scotus also says, in his discussion of unitive containment, that “if A is transmuted with B remaining, these differ essentially” (*QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 153 in *Opera Philosophica* III, 357). It is worth noting that here he is repeating the separation principle, but this time says that it is sufficient for A and B “differing essentially,” further suggesting that everything that is really distinct differs essentially. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *“Quaestio de Formalitatibus,”* 451-453, 487-494 p. 176, 178. See footnote 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 176 in *Opera Philosophica*. III, 363). The same point is made in *Ord*. II d. 3 p. 1 q.5-6 n. 189-190 in Vat. VII, 485). This passage also explains that the divine case is different, as the infinite mode of the attributes is sufficient to make them identical to each other. See also *Ord*. I, d. 8, pa. 1, q. 4, n. 217, 220 in Vat. IV, 274-275. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Another advantage of the interpretation I present is that it would show how Scotus in fact maintains divine simplicity even while allowing some mind-independent plurality into God (since all of the divine attributes are nevertheless identical), contrary to Steele and Williams (“Complexity without Composition”), who think he rejects the doctrine. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *QMet*. IV q. 2 n. 153 in *Opera Philosophica* III, 357-358). Presumably this will just be true of finite items. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Proportional separation also applies in the case of the Trinity, as there is proportional separation between the persons: the Father stands to the Son, and the Father and Son to the Spirit, as producer or generator to the produced or generated. And “a generating thing generates something, and generates a really distinct thing” (*Ord.* I. d. 5 p. 1, q. 1 n. 13 in Vat. IV, 16). Also, *Ord.* I d. 7, q. 1, n. 48-49 in Vat. IV, 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Note that they give the correct verdicts to the three counterexample cases to the standard view given above. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Blander denies that identity is symmetrical for Scotus; he says, “x is formally identical to x, but x is not *really* identical to x” (“Same as it never was,” 239). But this cannot be right since formal identity is a kind of identity *simpliciter*. See his article for a fuller discussion of the logical properties of identity in Scotus. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Using INSEPARABILITY, the Trinity is a case where A is identical to B, and B with C, but because A produces C, A is proportionally separate from C and thus not identical to C. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Thanks to Richard Cross, Stephen Dumont, Therese Cory, Stephen Ogden, Andreas Waldstein, Michael Lang, Cameron Lugo, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful advice and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)