

# Taking the Transitivity of Identity Seriously: Simplicity and Trinitarian Doctrine

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**ABSTRACT:** Although the apparent incompatibility of trinitarian doctrine and absolute divine simplicity (ADS) is well-known, a careful treatment of the transitivity of identity—which is the basis for that apparent incompatibility—is rarely applied to the issue. This paper explains why the transitivity of identity, as entailed by the law of non-contradiction, must be upheld in trinitarian theology as in all other forms of meaningful discourse. It then examines the efforts of ADS adherents to avoid the application of the transitivity of identity in the realm of trinitarian theology, and why those efforts fail. It concludes by attempting to address the key motivators that prompt theologians to embrace ADS, despite its clear tensions with trinitarian doctrine.

I take the doctrine of absolute divine simplicity (also sometimes called “the identity thesis”) to state that, with the single exception of the distinct trinitarian persons, everything in God is, in all real respects, identical with everything else in God.

What motivates supporters of absolute divine simplicity (hereafter, ADS)? Quickly (since the literature is immense, and most readers will probably be familiar with the general contours of the debate), there are several crucial concerns involved. These are, I think, the main ones:

1. *God's self-sufficiency.* If there are really different, really non–mutually reducible aspects in God, these aspects might appear to function as integral parts. And since a whole depends on its integral parts, the ascription of really distinct aspects would imply that God depends on something else for his existence—namely, his parts—and so doesn't exist independently.
2. *God's absoluteness.* God is the most fundamental, basic thing there is. But if God is really the ensemble of his non–mutually reducible aspects, then God would not be uniquely basic or fundamental, since these aspects would be just as basic as he is. God would thus be just one of a collection of ultimate realities—not *the* ultimate reality.
3. *Ecclesiastical commitments.* Many adherents of ADS are members of the Catholic Church, and may be strongly committed to a theological tradition associated with Thomas Aquinas (the most influential figure in Catholic theology and for ADS supporters particularly). More crucially, however, they may also consider themselves confessionally bound by certain conciliar statements which are sometimes seen as endorsing ADS.

I strongly sympathize with each of these concerns (not excluding the last, given that I'm myself a Catholic who works at a Catholic institution). I'm nonetheless convinced—as are plenty of philosophers and theologians<sup>1</sup>—that the principle of transitive identity renders the doctrine of the Trinity incompatible with ADS.<sup>2</sup> I'll review that incompatibility, engage typical ADS defenses against the transitivity of identity and show why they fail, and then I'll do my best to alleviate the three concerns just mentioned. It may be that most ADS adherents are too committed to the doctrine to be swayed from it by anything I could say, but I bet there are a fair number of more traditionally minded thinkers who have always found ADS implausible. I want to try to convince this latter group that their sense of incongruity is right, and that their concerns can be met in a way that better fits their own confessional loyalties.

## 1. The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Transitivity of Identity

Traditional Christian trinitarian doctrine states that there is only one God, but that in this God there are three persons, each of whom is really not the other two. The Fourth Lateran Council, for instance, confesses:

[T]herefore in God there is only Trinity, not a quaternity, because each of the Persons is that reality, that is, that divine substance, essence, or nature which alone is the beginning of all things, apart from which nothing else can be found. This reality is neither generating nor generated nor proceeding, but it is the Father who generates, the Son who is generated, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds, so that there be distinctions between Persons but unity in nature. (Denzinger [hereafter 'D.'] 804/2012, 268)

Later on, the Council of Florence would proclaim:

[O]ne true God, almighty, immutable, and eternal, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; one in essence, three in Persons . . . the Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son. . . . These three Persons are one God, not three gods, because there is one substance of the three, one essence, one nature, one Godhead, one immensity, one eternity, and everything is one where there is no opposition of relationship. (D. 1330/2012, 343)

These texts unquestionably rule out both tritheism, which would construe Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three distinct gods, and Sabellian modalism, which would construe 'Father,' 'Son,' and 'Holy Spirit' as simply different ways of thinking or talking about God which don't reflect any otherness in God's intrinsic character. So a) monotheism and b) the Father being really not the same person as the Son, may be taken as established doctrine.

<sup>1</sup> See a selection of such authors at the beginning of Dolezal (2014).

<sup>2</sup> My focus, then, is on the real distinction between each divine person and the concrete divine nature. I will not be addressing the philosophical and theological question of divine attribute/faculty identity (whether God is really identical to all his attributes and faculties, and whether all his attributes and faculties are really identical to one another) or the scriptural or magisterial data related to that question.

These same passages, however, have been adduced in support of the additional thesis that each of the three divine persons is really (i.e., objectively) identical to the single divine nature, even though each of the three persons is really not identical with the others. We'll now look at the logical problems with such an account, before offering an alternative interpretation of the declarations in question.

But first, it's maybe best to situate myself relative to the question of the indiscernability of identicals / identity of indiscernables. This question has been debated so extensively, and the principles reformulated in so many ways, that to avoid getting bogged down it might be most prudent just to explain how I'll be using the terms involved. So: I'll use the words 'identity' and 'sameness' synonymously, and will do the same with 'distinction' and 'difference.' I realize many philosophers do not use these words in this way, but if these terminological differences become relevant to the discussion, I'll note the fact to avoid confusion. I will, moreover, use the word 'different' (and 'distinct') to mean 'not identical' (and 'not the same'). Consequently, supposing ' $x$ ' and ' $y$ ' successfully refer, 'identical/the same' and 'distinct/different' will function as contradictories, such that a)  $x$  and  $y$  can't both be identical and distinct in the same respect; b)  $x$  and  $y$  can't be identical in all respects while being distinct in some respect; c) to the extent that  $x$  and  $y$  are identical, they are not distinct; and d) to the extent that  $x$  and  $y$  are distinct, they are not identical. In terms of what identity means in practice, we may say that to the extent that we affirm  $x$  and  $y$  to be identical, to that extent we affirm that what is true of  $x$  is true of  $y$ . This understanding of identity will be developed in greater detail shortly.

For now, let's return to the transitivity of identity, also called 'the principle of compared identity.' The principle states that if  $A$  is identical to  $B$ , and  $B$  is identical to  $C$ , then  $A$  is identical to  $C$ . So, relative to our theological topic, if we say that the Father is really identical to the divine nature (or essence, or substance), and the divine nature is really identical to the Son, then it seems we must say that the Father is really identical to the Son, which is the heretical doctrine of Sabellian modalism. So at first glance it looks like Sabellian modalism (which no traditional Christian wishes to endorse) follows from the claim that each of the divine persons is really identical to the divine nature.

Perhaps the most obvious maneuver for avoiding this alternative would be to reject, or at least restrict, the applicability of the principle of compared identity. This principle, it might be claimed, does not obtain universally—and in particular it does not obtain in the case of the divine nature. Suárez appears to have adopted such a solution: The divine nature is just not the sort of thing that can serve as a middle term syllogistically, and therefore we can't apply the principle of compared identity to the persons and the nature in God, even though each divine person is really identical with the divine nature. The transitivity of identity, then, is "a principle which has no place in the Trinity" (Suárez 1947, 59).

Suárez's argument seems to go something like this: The divine persons are incommunicable, such that "being-God-the-Father" is not something that can be possessed or shared by many. Only God the Father can be God the Father. Whereas the divine nature is communicable, inasmuch as the one, concrete individual divinity is shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, such that each of them "is" the one God. Now to affirm that two incommunicable things ( $A$  and  $B$ ) "are" a third communicable thing ( $C$ ) doesn't warrant concluding that  $A$  and  $B$  are the same thing, any more than affirming that Alice and Beth "are" women warrants concluding that Alice and Beth are different names for the same person. (See *De Sanctissimo Trinitatis mysterio*, lib. IV, c. 3, n. 8–9. Cf. Dalmau 1926, 94.)

This is all very well, but of course if Alice and Beth are known to be really distinct persons, no one would suggest that either Alice or Beth is really identical with

“womanhood” or with the same concrete instance of womanhood. ADS proponents, on the other hand, are claiming that both the Father and the Son are each really identical with the concrete, individual divine nature. For Suárez to emphasize that each divine person is really incommunicable while the divine nature is really communicable does little more than underscore the reason why a divine person can’t be really identical in all respects with the divine nature.

In any event, there’s no reason to exempt communicable items from the principle of compared identity. If, for instance, we say that human nature is equivalent to rational animality, and that rational animality is equivalent to the conjunction of an immortal soul and a material body, then we are justified in concluding that human nature is just the conjunction of an immortal soul and a material body. So much for the principle’s applicability to what is communicable. The principle also works fine for concrete individuals: If Mrs. Jones is “this woman,” and “this woman” is Sarah, then Mrs. Jones is Sarah. If, then, the principle of comparative identity holds good for communicable kinds, and for incommunicable concrete individuals, Suárez has given us no good reason to think it doesn’t hold for the communicable concrete individual that is the one divine substance.

In point of fact, the transitivity of identity holds good for anything whatsoever, on pain of self-contradiction. To see why requires a quick digression on kinds of identity, which we’ll have to do at some point and might as well do now. Let’s consider two crucial distinctions when it comes to identity:

*Absolute vs. Suppositional.* I am adapting these categories of identity from the corresponding distinction between absolute and suppositional necessity (see, for instance, *ST* I, q. 19, a. 3), and it is this initial distinction that I think addresses ancient paradoxes like the case of the hooded man or more recent ones like the puzzle regarding the number of planets.

We may ask for the “identity” of the man wearing a hooded cloak, and find that it is John. But we would be wrong to conclude that because one is necessarily identical to oneself, that the hooded man’s being identical to John entails that John is necessarily hooded. We distinguish absolute and conditional identity: John is necessarily identical to John, such that he could not fail to be John and still be John. So John being John is a case of absolute identity. His wearing a hooded garment is, however, not necessary to him. John being identical to the hooded man, therefore, is a case of suppositional necessity—on the supposition that John happens to be wearing a hooded garment, he will be a hooded man.

So too with the bogus syllogism adapted by Oderberg (2007, 29–30) from Quine (1943, 119): Eight is necessarily greater than seven; the number of planets is identical to eight; the number of the planets is necessarily greater than seven. Again, we invoke our distinction and respond that eight is necessarily greater than seven due to its absolute identity: Eight is absolutely identical with the integer immediately above seven. But eight is only suppositionally identical to the number of planets. On condition that there happen to be only eight planets, eight is identical to the number of planets. And, on the principle that a conclusion is only as strong as its weakest premise, a conclusion pertaining to absolute identity can’t derive from a premise that only pertains to suppositional necessity.

*Numerical vs. Qualitative.* Numerical identity designates the real sameness of a single thing which is referenced or considered twice, whether under the same description or not. So Darth Vader, despite all the drastic moral and physical changes he undergoes over the course of his life, is still numerically identical to Anakin Skywalker. Whereas qualitative identity has to do with things that may be different, though sharing certain characteristics. Thus we speak of “identical” twins when two distinct siblings have several of the same traits. Qualitative

identity, consequently, has to do not so much with the identity of the things in question, but with what they have in common.

It's within the context of the numerical vs. qualitative distinction that questions of relative identity usually come into play. Most find it uncontroversial that sometimes  $x$  is the same  $A$  as  $y$  but not the same  $B$  as  $y$  when ' $x$ ' and ' $y$ ' refer at the level of individual object while ' $A$ ' and ' $B$ ' refer at the level of quality (e.g., height and age). But is it possible that  $x$  is the same  $A$  as  $y$  but not the same  $B$  as  $y$  when not only ' $x$ ' and ' $y$ ' but also ' $A$ ' and ' $B$ ' refer at the level of individual object? That's a far more vexed question, and one which, fortunately, we need not tackle here.<sup>3</sup>

Getting back to the law of non-contradiction: As we stated above, to the extent that we affirm that  $A$  and  $B$  are identical, to that extent we mean that what is true of  $A$  is also true of  $B$ . If we mean that  $A$  and  $B$  are qualitatively identical, it may merely imply that what is true, say, of  $A$ 's appearance is true of  $B$ 's appearance. If we mean  $A$  and  $B$  are numerically identical, it implies that what is true of  $A$ 's individual essence is true of  $B$ 's individual essence. If we mean  $A$  and  $B$  are suppositionally identical, it implies that what is true of  $A$  happens to be true of  $B$ . And if we mean  $A$  and  $B$  are absolutely identical, it implies that what is true of  $A$  is necessarily true of  $B$ .

So if we say  $A$  and  $B$  are identical, and then we go on to say that  $A$  is identical to  $C$ , then we must conclude that  $B$  is identical to  $C$ . Otherwise we are claiming that what is true of  $A$  is true of  $B$ , and that it is true of  $A$  that it is identical to  $C$ , but that it is not true of  $B$  that it is identical to  $C$ . In which case we would affirming that what is true of  $A$  is true of  $B$ , and that what is true of  $A$  is not true of  $B$ .

Certainly, for a violation of the principle of compared identity to count as a genuine contradiction the identity involved must remain of the same kind. So what kind of identity do ADS theologians want to present as obtaining between the divine essence and each divine person? Certainly absolute identity; ADS theologians don't claim the divine nature and each divine person just happen to be identical. So we're dealing with a necessary identity. And because ADS doesn't recognize a real distinction between the divine nature, the divine attributes, and each divine person, ADS theologians should maintain both a qualitative and numerical identity between each divine Person and the divine nature.

From all this it would appear to follow that affirming a) the Father is necessarily, numerically, and qualitatively identical to the divine nature; b) the divine nature is necessarily, numerically, and qualitatively identical to the Son, logically commits one to c) the Father is necessarily, numerically, and qualitatively identical to the Son. Otherwise, one not only violates the transitivity of identity, but in doing so, the law of non-contradiction.

Let me state clearly: If a given theologian does recognize a real distinction (and therefore, according to the terms outlined above, a real non-identity) between each person and the concrete divine nature, he may consider himself an ADS theologian, but he doesn't fall into the group of thinkers I'm targeting. Certainly, if the identity between each divine person and the divine essence is only a qualified one, no logical problem ensues.

So, for instance, Chua has recently argued that because there are different ways of being really one (or identical), and correspondingly different ways of being really distinct, there's no difficulty with saying that the divine persons are really distinct in one way (relationally) while

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<sup>3</sup> For sure though, the individual object/quality distinction which grounds the numerical identity/qualitative identity distinction can't just be glossed over. Van Inwagen (2003, 95–97), while doing some creative paraphrasing, seems not to notice the crucial logical disparities involved between  $x$  and  $y$  being the same price and  $x$  and  $y$  being the same person.

also being really identical in another way (substantially) (2022, 107–108). I think this is quite true, but it implies a real distinction between the divine person and the divine substance. As Chua notes in the first half of his paper, being in different ways corresponds to differences between different things. For instance, it's different to be (or to be one, or to be a thing, or to be distinct) accidentally and to be (or to be one, or to be a thing, or to be distinct) substantially precisely because there are certain important and objective ways in which an accident is not a substance. So if we wish to say that in God being the same/being distinct substantially is different than being the same/being distinct personally, it can only be because there are certain important and objective ways in which the divine substance is not a divine person. This would, as Chua says, “dissipate” the coherence problem, but it would also mean abandoning what we've labelled ADS.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly with efforts to solve the consistency of trinitarian doctrine by appeals to the logic of relative identity, such that it's admissible to affirm that the Father is the same divine substance as the Son, while simultaneously affirming that the Father is not the same divine person as the Son. If it's admissible to say this, it implies that *being the same divine person as* and *being the same divine substance as* are really distinct, which in turn implies that divine person and divine substance are really distinct.<sup>5</sup> The question regarding whether comprehensive identity is meaningful category—which surfaces in both Chua's paper and discussions of relative identity—isn't one we need to take a stand on in order to know that if  $x$  and  $y$  are not the same in some respect, then they aren't identical in all respects.

Those who, unlike Chua and the trinitarian proponents of relative identity theory, regard the identity of each divine person with the concrete divine essence as being really unqualified (i.e., those who endorse what I've labelled ADS) are still left with the prospect of contradiction, and so employ a different set of strategies to defend trinitarian doctrine.

One strategy is to restrict the extension not only of the principle of compared identity, but also of the law of non-contradiction, at least as it pertains to divine matters. Basil Lourié, for instance, maintains that the Trinity as described by Gregory Nazianzus is “certainly incompatible with any Trinity respecting the principle of non-contradiction,” and goes on to make the very broad claim that “eastern patristic orthodoxy” requires the allowance of contradiction in trinitarian theology (2019, 1095). Even more recently, Beall has argued from a less denominationally specific perspective that in the face of traditional trinitarian claims, not only is the transitivity of identity sometimes inapplicable, but the law of non-contradiction must be restricted too (2023, 17).

Dialetheism has been around a while, has a number of notable adherents, and is torturously difficult, and maybe even impossible, to refute. Nonetheless, most people still maintain the old view that if you contradict yourself it means not even you believe what you're saying. So to commit a contradiction concerning God's character means the theologian is confused, and to insist that contradictions obtain in the case of God is to insist that confusion is insuperable—in which case there doesn't seem to be any point to theology (i.e., trying to bring clarity to divine things) in the first place. In which case I'll proceed on the assumption that contradictions should be avoided.

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<sup>4</sup> Chua also repeatedly and mistakenly claims that the coherence issue (i.e., the apparent conflict with the transitivity of identity) doesn't even arise during Aquinas's trinitarian exposition. “Aquinas does not see even an apparent conflict here” (106). Chua is apparently unaware that earlier in the *Summa*, when speaking of the distinction in the divine relations, Aquinas addresses the coherence objection based on the transitivity of identity (*Summa Theologica* I, q. 28, a. 3, ad. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Rea acknowledges that part of the relative identity strategy for making trinitarian doctrine coherent involves denying an absolute identity of any divine person with God (i.e., the concrete individual divinity) (2009, 250).

Lagrange (one of the most historically important upholders of the ADS doctrine), says as much when he criticizes Suárez for limiting the applicability of the principle of comparative identity to creatures:

This is the same as saying that this axiom [the transitivity of identity] does not apply to God. But this axiom is directly derived from the principle of contradiction or identity, which patently must be applicable to God analogically because it is the law of being as being, the most universal law therefore, apart from which there is nothing but absurdity, which would be unthinkable. . . . Henceforth the theologian could not argue about the divine perfections because his argument is based on the principle of identity or contradiction. This is pure agnosticism. (Garrigou-Lagrange 1952, 123, 141)

Agreed. But if we don't restrict the principle of compared identity, how can the Father and the Son be truly said to be both really identical to the divine nature, and yet not with each other?

## 2. Efforts to Escape the Implied Contradiction

One of the standard ADS responses centers on highlighting the difference between a real distinction and a conceptual distinction (the conceptual distinction is sometimes called a “virtual”<sup>6</sup> or “logical” or “notional” or “formal” distinction, or a distinction “of reason”). A real distinction, in this context, means that there is, prior to considering the matter, some real otherness in the thing itself.<sup>7</sup> The difference between one line and another in a given triangle exists objectively, really, prior to our recognition of the difference. By contrast, the distinction between a trilateral shape and a triangular shape regards what aspect of the triangle we're thinking about, even though objectively a triangular shape and a trilateral shape are the same thing.

The next step is to claim that the principle of compared identity applies only to things that are the same in all respects. But, the argument goes, since each of the divine persons, while being really the same as the divine nature, is conceptually distinct from the divine nature, it follows that the divine persons are not the same in all respects as the divine nature. In which case the principle of compared identity can't be applied to syllogisms where one of the premises involves the real identity of a divine person with the divine nature.<sup>8</sup> Again from Lagrange:

The laws of the syllogism, however, are not verified except in formal predications, since the process of reasoning does not deal with things in

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<sup>6</sup> A virtual distinction is sometimes further specified as a conceptual distinction with a basis in reality, although this basis in reality is not any objective, pre-conceptual distinction in the thing under consideration. Virtual distinctions themselves may be further specified as major and minor. Here again, none of this entails any actual distinction in the object of thought. Cf. Garrigou-Lagrange (1952, 119–20).

<sup>7</sup> As I will underscore again later, this use of “real distinction” should not be confused with Scotus's use of the same expression, which refers in his case not only to otherness but to actual separability.

<sup>8</sup> This is the argument Aquinas employs (*Summa Theologica* I, q. 28, a. 3, ad. 1) in keeping each trinitarian relation (paternity, filiation, spiration) really distinct from the others while maintaining their real identity with the divine nature.

themselves, but only through the mediation of our concepts. Therefore if we wish to conclude the identity of two things by our reasoning, we must consider these two things from the same formal aspect. Otherwise we do not obey the first law of the syllogism: the term must be threefold: middle, major and minor. According to this law the middle term must be perfectly distributed, that is, taken in the same sense in the major and the minor . . . in the Trinity it is conceded that the Father and the Son are actually the same as the divine essence, but they are not the same formally. . . . It is clear, therefore, that the following syllogism is not true: This God is the Father, but this God is the Son, therefore the Son is the Father. (Garrigou-Lagrange 1952, 138–39)

But this, it seems to me, is a case of use/mention confusion (i.e., changing the topic from divine things to the concepts we employ in theological thinking). If we say that the divine nature and the divine person are conceptually different, we aren't any longer discussing the divine nature or the divine person—we're discussing our concepts. And regardless of whether the concepts we use change, as they often do in a syllogism, if the real identity of the subject matter remains throughout the premises, then the transitivity of identity will carry through to the conclusion. Thus: Two plus two equals four; four equals five minus one; therefore, two plus two equals five minus one. These three terms may be conceptually distinct, and one might even argue that the conceptual distinctness is rooted in the real nature of four (although it also relies on introducing the really distinct numbers two, five, and one), but in any case, all three terms refer to what is really identical, and consequently the conclusion is valid. This is because the transitivity of identity applies universally to things as they are in themselves, regardless of how we speak or think about them.

Various examples have been put forward to show that in cases of real identity but conceptual distinction, two things identical to a third need not be identical to one another. For instance: “So also in an equilateral triangle the three equal angles are actually the same as a third, namely, the surface of the triangle, but they are really distinguished from each other because of relative opposition” (Garrigou-Lagrange 1952, 137). It's not easy to know what to make of this example. What qualifies two angles in a given triangle as really distinct is that each angle has a line the other lacks. But in that case one angle will not be the same as the triangle's surface area, since the latter will be constituted by a line that does not constitute the angle. On the other hand, if by “angle” Lagrange just means the complete triangle considered from a particular point of view, then the three angles will not be really distinct from one another anymore than from the surface area as a whole.

Another proposed illustration: “In God mercy is the same as justice; but justice is the principle of punishment; therefore God inflicts punishment through His mercy. The argument is false because in God mercy and justice are not the same formally [conceptually] although they are the same materially [really]” (Garrigou-Lagrange, 139). This is a particularly inapt example, since parents are very familiar with the idea of punishment as a mercy, despite the counterintuitiveness of that truth on the part of the punished children. But in any case, if mercy and justice are really the same thing in God, then the most we could assert is that we don't tend to think in terms of “mercy” when God inflicts punishment. We certainly couldn't deny that punishment was really an expression of God's mercy. In fact, we'd have proven it was, since what isn't really distinct can't have really distinct effects.

Finally, the analogy offered by Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* I, q. 28, a. 3, ad. 1) concerns (transitive) action, passion, and motion. Action and passion are really distinct: To act is not the same as to be acted upon. But although motion and passion, or motion and action, are conceptually distinct, they are not really distinct, since what's produced by the agent is a motion and what's undergone by the patient is the same motion. Lonergan, who approvingly presents this analogy as "classic" for maintaining both the real distinction between Father and Son as well as their real identity with the divine nature, is also candid about its weakness. For if the motion is taken just as a single event conceived from different perspectives (that of the agent and that of the patient), then of course there's no real distinction between action and passion. On the other hand, if we consider what the agent really performs and what the patient really undergoes then the two are really different (e.g., it's not the same thing to kick something and to be kicked by something). In which case they cannot both be identical to a third thing, "since action supposes act, passion supposes potency, and the same reality in the same respect cannot be both in act and in potency" (Lonergan 2007, 285).

In each of these cases, if  $A$  and  $B$  are really distinct, they aren't both really identical to  $C$ . Whereas if  $A$  and  $B$  are really identical, then if one is identical to  $C$  both are. This is exactly what the principle of compared identity entails, and the concepts we use to mentally engage things doesn't affect the principle's universal applicability. None of the examples shows a case wherein the transitivity of identity doesn't apply in cases of real identity, even when different concepts come into play.

Notice too that the ADS proponents don't disagree with the basic principle that insofar as  $x$  and  $y$  are identical, what is said truly of  $x$  is also said truly of  $y$ . Their strategy instead is to distinguish a way in which  $x$  and  $y$  are identical (i.e., really), and a way in which they are not (i.e., conceptually). This, they believe, justifies the conclusion that even if  $x$  and  $y$  are really identical, as long as they are conceptually distinct, some things said truly of  $x$  are not said truly of  $y$ . But what I am arguing is that a conceptual distinction doesn't qualify or diminish a real identity, and so it can't block the inference that a real identity between  $x$  and  $y$ , coupled with a real identity between  $y$  and  $z$ , entails the real identity of  $x$  and  $z$ .

It might be suggested that highlighting the conceptual distinctions involved is meant to show that because our concepts of these divine matters are limited, we have to alternate from our concept of God the Father to our concept of the divine nature, and then from our concept of the divine nature to our concept of God the Son. Because we can't make the Father's identity to the divinity and the Son's identity to the divinity present to our minds all at once, but rather employ these concepts "disjunctively" (see Garrigou-Lagrange, 126), we are never forced to think an implicit contradiction by thinking ( $A = B \wedge B = C$ ) and ( $A \neq C$ ) simultaneously. Similarly, Stump suggests that our limited concepts require us to think of divine simplicity at one time while maintaining other apparently incompatible doctrines about God at other times:

That these apparently contradictory claims all have to be affirmed shows that there is a deficiency in our mode of speaking, because, of course, strictly speaking these claims cannot all be true. Furthermore, the laws of logic still apply to God, and not just anything can be affirmed of God. (Stump 2016, 207)

This statement raises the question: Are the claims involved only "apparently contradictory"? Or is it really the case that these claims are incompatible (i.e., "these claims cannot all be true")? If they are just apparently contradictory, then the theologian's job is to

show why they're not really contradictory. Whereas if they are truly contradictory, then they do not have to be affirmed and should not be affirmed, and saying the laws of logic still apply to God means, if it means anything, that the law of non-contradiction retains its force in theological discourse. Stump appeals to the example of quantum mechanics, which, she claims, "requires alternately attributing to light incompatible characteristics" (202). But of course quantum physicists are required to do nothing of the sort. They can simply say that photons, for instance, sometimes yield experimental results that are like the effects of waves, and sometimes yield experimental results that are like the effects of particles.

Again, we are operating here on the same assumption as every non-dialetheist theologian, viz., that there is just no room in sensible speech of any kind for genuine contradiction, and that if there were, we could assert any kind of absurdity. We could defend the possible existence of a round square, and say that it was only our mental limitations that forced us to toggle back and forth between the concepts "round" and "angular," but that even if (or because?) we couldn't think them at once or even say them simultaneously, we could rest secure, knowing we were on safe logical ground. But this is what most theologians want to avoid, which is why we cling to the law of non-contradiction, which prevents us from speaking nonsense that can't be thought and can't be so.

ADS proponents generally lay the most stress on conceptual, not verbal distinctions, between the divine persons or relations and the divine nature,<sup>9</sup> but the argument might be shifted to the level of language. Gilles Emery, for instance, argues that our talk of the divine essence signifies differently than when we talk about the divine persons or relations—even though the divine essence is the divine person. "Our words," he says, "cannot do any better than this." This, he claims, prohibits the ascription to the essence of what is proper to the persons, and vice versa. He then winds up with this remarkable conclusion: "One does not say that the 'essence engenders,' even though the Father who engenders *is nothing other than* the divine essence" (Emery 2007, 147, emphasis mine). This seems like an alarming technique, which if generalized could justify a lot of nonsense for theologians of all stripes. What's to prevent anyone who wants to avoid coming to terms with the difficulties implicit in a given position from simply blocking an unwelcome inference with a preemptive "one does not say"?

Let's recall that if two words or phrases signify differently, it's either denotatively or connotatively. If "divine essence" and "divine person" signify differently according to denotation, then it's simply false to say that the divine essence is really the same as the divine person. But if person and essence signify what is numerically, necessarily, and qualitatively the same thing, then whatever our connotations it remains that what is really true of the divine essence is true of the divine person. Which, of course, implicitly leads to the heretical conclusions Emery explicitly rejects by insisting that "one does not say" them.

It's sometimes said that all our speech is so inadequate to the divine, that no matter what we say something false will be implied. In Stump's words: "Our mode of speaking is therefore inaccurate as regards God" (205). In which case one might think the best we can do is formulate linguistic rules (you can talk this way about the divine essence but not the divine persons, and vice versa) that minimize the erroneous character of religious discourse. But when it comes to the issue of whether our speech necessarily implies something false

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<sup>9</sup> So, for instance, Lonergan says, "We grant that through a merely verbal distinction, nothing is produced pertaining to a real distinction. We deny that nothing is produced pertaining to a real distinction when diverse intelligible conceptions, namely, that of the absolute and that of the relative, are verified in the same reality." (287).

about God, it seems to me a very careful distinction must be drawn between different kinds of implication. If what I denote can be shown to imply something false, then we have a clear-cut case of *reductio*, and I should retract my statement. This procedure applies in theological discourse as elsewhere. On the other hand, if the terms I use carry undesirable associations, then I can look for more felicitous phrasing or just qualify at the outset to nip any misguided connotations in the bud.

So, for instance, if I say that I went to an interesting lecture by St. Thomas Aquinas the other day, it would directly imply something false (i.e., that Aquinas is still alive) and this implication would convict my statement of error. Whereas if I say that Thomas Aquinas was “positively medieval,” the negative and largely unfair associations conveyed to many ears by the phrase should probably prompt me to look for a better description. Still, it’s true that Aquinas was positively medieval, and any truths about Aquinas that this phrase directly implies are true as well (e.g., that he definitely isn’t going around giving lectures today).

Likewise, if the word “Father” really denotes the same thing as “God,” which really denotes the same thing as “the divine nature,” then whatever the associations these terms convey, what is true of the divine nature is true of the Father. Granted, what’s true of the word “divine essence” is not true of the word “Father”—for instance, one has thirteen letters and the other only six. Also, the two terms have very different associations. But those distinctions are at the level of mention, not use. If what we reference by the term “the Father” is really identical with what we reference by the term “the divine essence,” and what we reference by the term “the divine essence” is really identical with what we reference by the term “the Son,” then it follows that what we reference by the term “the Father” is really identical with what we reference by the term “the Son,” which is just straight Sabellianism.

Talking about our words and our ideas is, in this case, to evade the issue. The question concerns God, the divine nature, and the divine persons. And as Lagrange admits, whatever the challenge posed by our ideas and words, those challenges are not shared by the blessed in Heaven who behold the reality of God directly, and certainly not by the divine mind itself (Garrigou-Lagrange 126). So—prescinding from notional or verbal discussions—is the Father necessarily, numerically, and qualitatively identical to the divine nature? If so, it follows that in communicating the divine nature to the Son, and so constituting the Son as God, it must be that the Father communicates *being-the-Father* to the Son, and so constitutes the Son as Father.

At this point the ADS proponents largely fall back on the desperate expedient of identifying contraries, or even contradictories, appealing to God’s transcendence, or mysteriousness, or supreme eminence. Lagrange approvingly cites Cajetan’s declaration that God is “both communicable and incommunicable” (Garrigou-Lagrange, 127).<sup>10</sup> The *esse in* is declared the same as the *esse ad* (Lonergan, 291). What is relative is declared the same as what is absolute (Rahner, 72). And it’s quite true that if we make these identifications in God, then we are perfectly entitled to infer that although the Father and the Son are both identical to the divine nature, they are not identical to one another. But such an inference would simply be an instance of the principle *ex contradictione quodlibet*. For instance, if we begin with the premise that one equals two, we can certainly elude the transitivity of identity, since we will then be justified in saying that one equals two (because it’s a premise) and that one equals one (because identity is reflexive, i.e., tautologies are trivially true) and also that one does not equal two (because it’s evidently true). So too, if we want to say that what is incommunicable

<sup>10</sup> The passage is taken from Cajetan’s commentary on the *Summa*, I, q. 39, a. 1. The translation given by Marshner (2024, 679) is “shareable and unshareable.”

is identical to what is communicable, then we can say that the divine nature can be communicated from Father to Son, that divine fatherhood can't be communicated from Father to Son, and that divine fatherhood is the same thing as the divine nature. Also, if "we presuppose" with Rahner "that two opposed relations can be really identical with something absolute," then it follows that the same single absolute (i.e., non-relative) thing can be identical with two distinct relative (i.e., non-absolute) things. All we have to do to get all these ADS *desiderata* is utterly forsake the law of non-contradiction.

It seems obvious to me that ADS proponents, who tend to be an intellectually rigorous lot, would object at once if any interlocutors of theirs were to identify contraries or contradictories in any other context. If a theologian were to say, for instance, that temporality and timelessness, or omnipotence and weakness, or omniscience and uncertainty were identical in the mysterious divine preeminence, ADS proponents would rightly insist that divine mysteriousness is no excuse for talking patent nonsense. And the same standards of cogency should be observed in the present discussion. The inability to provide details of a metaphysical or theological system is one thing; making statements that imply flat contradictions is something else.<sup>11</sup>

To summarize: All the efforts to secure the comprehensively real identity of divine person and divine nature while at the same time preserving the real distinction of divine person from divine person, run afoul of the law of non-contradiction, either by violating the principle of compared identity or by openly identifying contraries and/or contradictories. And that's only in cases where the theologian in question acknowledges the dilemma. Some recent ADS adherents, when thematically writing to endorse the doctrine of absolute divine simplicity in trinitarian theology, mention the logical challenges associated with the transitivity of identity only in passing, or simply ignore them altogether.<sup>12</sup>

Major theological figures, East and West, have recognized the impossibility of consistently maintaining the real identity of each person with the divine nature along with the real distinction of each person from the others. To take just two medieval cases: Gregory Palamas makes it clear that each divine person can't really be nothing other than the divine essence (see Pino 2023, 173–74) and Scotus states that some distinction obtains between a divine person and the divine essence "preceding any act of intellect, bet it created or uncreated" (*Ordinatio* I, d. 2, p. 2, qq. 1–4, n. 388, as quoted by Cross 2019, 61). Since Scotus reserved the phrase "real distinction" for cases of potential separability (see King 2003, 8–10), he doesn't class the distinction between divine person and divine nature as real (since obviously Scotus doesn't believe any divine person could be separated from the divine nature). However, he clearly means what we have been calling a "real distinction," namely, one that is intrinsic to the things in question and not one simply imposed by the mind. His statement consequently entails a disavowal of unqualifiedly real identity between the divine nature and each divine person, and should serve as some deterrent against invoking the authority of a spuriously universal tradition to distract from the cogency issues at stake.

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<sup>11</sup> Kilby (2005, 422 ff.) seems not to understand this distinction when she openly celebrates what seems to her a violation of transitive identity in Aquinas's trinitarian theology. She sees this as "displaying it as beyond our comprehension." But it's within our comprehension that no contradiction can be true, which means an apparent contradiction in a system isn't something to celebrate.

<sup>12</sup> For cases of the first, see Dolezal (2014) and Spencer (2023); for cases of the second, see Long (2016) and White (2016; 2022, especially 434).

### 3. Responding to the Concerns of ADS Proponents

What about the doctrines of divine perseity and absoluteness, the preservation of which gives ADS its *raison d'être*? Doesn't divvying God into these distinct categories of person and nature make him composite, and doesn't composition render him dependent on his parts and so less fundamental than they are?

To start with, whatever ADS supporters imagine, no one thinks God is made up of separable pieces that can be actually taken apart. And if the claim is made that every case of *A* not being absolutely, numerically, and qualitatively identical to *B* involves the real separability of *A* and *B*—well, a claim like that is going to take some serious uphill work in getting past the seemingly glaring counterexamples. Trinitarian doctrine, to return to that shared commitment, patently falsifies the principle that what is really distinct is really separable—no trinitarian thinks the Father and the Son, who are not really identical, are like parts of a whole that could be split up to dissolve the whole Trinity.

Or take a naturally occurring case of what's really distinct but not separable. It's safe to presume that the created faculty of knowing and the created faculty of willing are not the same thing, since, for instance, a person can succeed at knowing what's morally right while failing to will what's morally right. And yet it's not easy to conceive of either a created will or a created intellect existing in isolation, without its corresponding faculty. This indissolubility has been invoked since antiquity as evidence for the natural immortality of the soul (if the soul should cease to exist, it would only be due to the separation of its existence and its essence, not its intellect and will). So if these two really distinct aspects of the created soul are really inseparable, why not the really distinct aspects of the divine? Why should real distinction entail divisibility in God when it doesn't automatically entail divisibility in creatures?

The case of the soul (or of angels) also illustrates that acknowledging the really distinct aspects of a thing doesn't create any competition at the level of fundamentality. If we recognize the categories a) soul, b) intellect, and c) will, and we furthermore say that the soul isn't just the intellect, and the intellect isn't reducible to the will, then it seems we have three mutually irreducible realities. And yet there's no competition between the soul and its intellect or its will. It's not as though one comes first, or is causally dependent on the others. And the term "psychical" applies to all three. So also with God: It's not as though distinguishing really different aspects of divinity implies the postulation of something non-divine that competes with divine absoluteness. By definition, the divine nature and the divine persons are both divine—to say there are multiple aspects of God doesn't imply multiple gods, any more than saying there are multiple aspects of an individual soul implies many souls.

So does all this mean we can just demote simplicity from its traditional role as a divine attribute? I certainly don't think so. The doctrine of divine simplicity is a staple of traditional theology, but there are plenty of ways to present the teaching apart from the radical identification of everything in God as advocated by ADS. For instance, Brian Davies, although writing in defense of the standard Thomist position, reduces the doctrine of simplicity to three points: a) God is immutable, b) God is not just one member of a genus, and c) God's existence isn't caused by something else (Davies 2010, 36). We could, if we wanted, add indivisibility and absoluteness to the list. As we've seen, none of these elements is contradicted by the schema we've outlined.

What about the authority of tradition? Two major Western councils, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Florence (1439–1445), issued trinitarian professions by which many Catholic theologians may feel themselves bound. We excerpted these passages at the beginning of this essay, but to refresh the reader’s memory let’s go over them again even more briefly:

[T]herefore in God there is only Trinity, not a quaternity, because each of the Persons is that reality, that is, that divine substance, essence, or nature which alone is the beginning of all things, apart from which nothing else can be found. This reality is neither generating nor generated nor proceeding, but it is the Father who generates, the Son who is generated and the Holy Spirit who proceeds, so that there be distinctions between the Persons but unity in nature. (D. 804/p. 268)

These three Persons are one God, not three gods, because there is one substance of the three, one essence, one nature, one Godhead, one immensity, one eternity, and everything is one where there is no opposition of relationship. (D. 1330/p. 343)

This isn’t the place to engage in an extensive treatment of these statements’ history or authoritative status, but I think even a cursory consideration will show that they don’t plainly entail ADS in the sense outlined above.<sup>13</sup>

Starting with the first statement (a defense of Peter Lombard and a condemnation of Joachim of Fiore), Lateran IV is concerned to maintain that there is only one God in contradistinction to any polytheism in which three gods share a divine nature the way multiple humans share a human nature. Lateran’s statement just affirms that the concrete individual God to which each divine person is united is numerically identical to the concrete individual God to which each other divine person is united. True, the statement says each divine person “is” the divine nature, but of course “is” is used in many ways. We may, for instance, say that Marie “is” ineffably unique, or that Marie is “this woman” or that Marie “is” human or that Marie “is” knocking at the door—and each of these uses of the copula arguably designates a different categorical aspect of Marie.

This emphasis on the numerical oneness of God addresses Joachim’s worry about replacing the Trinity with a quaternity. Because the concrete divinity is fully shared by each of the three persons, the concrete divinity can’t fulfill the role of a fourth person, since it belongs to the character of each person that it’s not communicable to the other persons. Father, Son, and Spirit all are God, all share the same divinity, but they aren’t all Father, and they don’t all share paternity. Far from supporting the identity thesis, the divinity’s communicability and paternity’s incommunicability—as we saw earlier—imply that each is really not the same as the other. Put differently, if the divine nature isn’t like a divine person, it can’t be completely the same as a divine person.

When we come to the line about “that divine substance, essence, or nature which alone is the beginning of all things, apart from which nothing else can be found,” it might seem that this last phrase clearly asserts that in God there’s nothing other than the divine

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<sup>13</sup> So, for instance, when Lateran IV talks about God’s substance being “entirely simple,” it frames that simplicity in terms of indivisibility (D. 805/p. 269). And no traditional theist wants to deny that God is entirely indivisible.

(concrete) nature. But that's probably not the import at all. Coming on the tails of "which alone is the beginning of all things," the clause "*praeter quod aliud inveniri non potest*" might be justly rendered "beyond which no other thing may be found." So it's not an affirmation that everything in God is really identical to everything else—it's a much more rudimentary acknowledgement that God is, by nature, the most primordial thing there is, than which nothing can be found that's more fundamental. It's a tribute to divine absoluteness, to which, as we've said, folks who don't agree with ADS can still subscribe.

What about the statement from the Council of Florence, which repudiates tritheism by affirming one divine substance, one divine nature, one godhead, one immensity, one eternity, and then wraps up by saying "everything is one where there is no opposition of relationship"? By saying that everything is one, isn't that equivalent to declaring that everything other than the three persons—including each divine person and the one divinity—is really the same thing?

Not at all, it seems to me. "One" in this clause is clearly to be contrasted with "three"—the point is that each person of the Trinity, while really not the same as the others, does not possess a substance or nature or any divine attribute that isn't really the same as that possessed by the other persons. We can make it plainer still if we say that the significance of the declaration is that there are not three divine substances, or three divine natures, or three godheads, or three immensities or eternities or whatever. There are three divine persons, and apart from what constitutes each person as unique relative to the others everything is fully held in common among them.

Granted, this is a quick reading of these passages—the theological historians will have to provide us with a much more extended treatment of the sources and context for these declarations before we can give anything like a definitive interpretation. Its brevity notwithstanding, the above consideration involves longer excerpts and more contextual analysis of these texts than any citation I've seen in support of ADS (which consists in perhaps just the reference, or at most a clause which is supposed to show that the Church officially proclaims the identity thesis<sup>14</sup>). So even this minimal glance at the texts should at least show that ADS adherents have a lot more work to do before they can credibly invoke these conciliar passages in support of their own position.

I certainly don't want to give the impression that I'm trying to massage the magisterial data until it's conducive to my already held views. As far as I'm concerned, if a given theologian really considers certain texts, whether biblical or ecclesial, to be normative to her worldview, that normativity only retains its practical purchase if she adapts her theories to the texts and not vice versa. Otherwise one simply reduces faith to the level of reason, making the former ultimately superfluous. On the other hand, if a given text appears to express a teaching that seems to terminate in absurdity, that's a cue to go back to the text and see if it's susceptible of other plausible interpretations. This procedure may result in avoiding logically awkward tenets, but also and more importantly (from the perspective of faith) may offer a better, clearer understanding of the ecclesial teaching in question.

## Conclusion

There's often something of an *impasse* on discussions of absolute divine simplicity. Proponents of the doctrine may rightly feel that their critics don't appreciate the traditional

<sup>14</sup> For a representative illustration, see Ott 2018, 77.

*bona fides* of the doctrine, nor the careful and creative efforts of especially Thomistic thinkers to ward off the implications of the transitivity of identity in trinitarian theology. I believe these efforts are ultimately unsuccessful, but I hope it's clear that my judgment isn't due to unfamiliarity with the arguments, nor to a lack of sympathy with the motives underlying ADS. ADS is simply not sustainable from an orthodox trinitarian perspective, and far from discounting the concerns that give rise to its defense, we should dedicate our energies to shoring up the traditional attributes of divine absoluteness, perseity, unicity, and even simplicity in ways that don't run afoul of other Christian claims or the laws of logic.

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