Historians of philosophy as well as philosophers of a realist inclination have devoted considerable study to Scotus’s formal distinction. The former have explored the origins of the formal distinction, locating its source in the writings of such thirteenth-century figures as St. Bonaventure, Richard Rufus, and Peter John Olivi.¹ The latter have emphasized the importance of the formal distinction for establishing an ontological foundation for moderate realism in epistemology. Fr. Allan Wolter, O.F.M., for example, has argued that the formal distinction, rightly understood, has its analogue in the philosophy of Aquinas in the form of a distinction of reason with a basis in the thing. Furthermore, he claims that the ontology of the formal distinction allows a moderate realist to account for the partial nature of our knowledge inasmuch as each of the formally distinct features of a thing may be conceived without another being adequately understood.² Yet among both historians of philosophy and philosophers there has been considerable disagreement about whether the formal distinction should be understood as a subtype of the real distinction, as a unique subtype of the distinction of reason


or as introducing a third type of distinction, intermediate between a real distinction and a distinction of reason.

Such a disagreement finds resonances in the understanding and characterization of the formal distinction from the fourteenth century onwards. In his baccalaureate thesis published in 1663, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, drawing upon a medieval tradition of which he was probably unaware, described John Duns Scotus’s formal distinction as one “intermediate between a real distinction and one of reason”. Likewise, in his notes to his personal copy of Daniel Stahl’s *Compendium Metaphysicae* in the section on the ‘Explanation of the Types and Modes of Distinction’, Leibniz writes that “the Scotists posit a kind of distinction that is intermediate between a real distinction and a distinction of reason, calling it a formal distinction *ex natura rei*.” What I would like to explore here is part of the medieval discussion behind Leibniz’s identification, or, as we shall see, possible misidentification of the formal distinction as an intermediate distinction by focusing upon two of the more prominent figures in the early history of Scotism, James of Ascoli and William Alnwick, and a non-Scotist supporter of the formal distinction, Thomas Wylton.

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5 James of Ascoli was known to have been present among the masters of theology who approved the proceedings against Marguerite de la Porée in May, 1310; hence his *Quodlibeta* are placed either in that year or the preceding year (1309–1310). In addition to his *Quodlibeta*, he is known to have authored some ordinary questions, a *Commentary on the Sentences*, and a *Tabula* of Scotus’s writings. Thomas Wylton, also known as Thomas Anglicus, was a member of Merton College, Oxford from 1288–1301 where he was probably associated with Walter Burley and may also have studied under Thomas Sutton prior to the latter’s entry into the Dominican order. Receiving permission from his bishop, Wylton went to Paris to study theology in 1304; he obtained his mastership in theology in 1312. Though he probably remained in Paris until 1316, he returned to St. Paul’s shortly thereafter. He did return to Paris once more in the period 1320–1322 before returning to England; he died in 1327. William of Alnwick is known to have been living in the house at Paris (probably for his lectorate) during the academic year 1302–1303, for in June of 1303 he sided with the King of France and against the Pope during the crisis at the University of Paris in 1303. He taught at both Paris and Oxford in the period 1314–1318 and thereafter taught at Bologna (ca. 1322) and Naples. He died at Avignon in 1333.