

The One Divine Nature

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Abstract: The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that there are three divine Persons, each of whom is fully God, who have between them a single concrete divine nature. This paper attempts to show that, and how, these claims are coherent rather than contradictory. In the process a model for the Trinity is proposed using the notion of constitution.

Keywords: Trinity, Divine nature, Constitution, Yandell, Swinburne

The Problem

According to the doctrine of the Trinity there are three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each of whom is fully divine, fully God. There is, furthermore, a single concrete divine nature—a single trope or instance of Godhood—that is the nature of each of the three Persons. As an analytic theologian, my task is to explore whether these two statements make sense together. In analytic circles, some theologians believe that it is impossible to make sense of three fully divine persons and one single instance of Godhood. Keith Yandell, for example, refers disparagingly to “what appears to be a self-contradictory doctrine to the effect that the trinitarian Persons all have the *concrete* divine nature.”¹ In his own account of the Trinity Yandell abandons this doctrine, holding that each Person has all of the essential divine attributes but denying that they have between them a single instance of Godhood, a single concrete divine nature. In this essay I will show that what appears self-contradictory to Yandell is not in fact self-contradictory, and that the doctrine he proposes to abandon is an important, indeed essential, part of trinitarian doctrine. First I discuss a few texts which make that case that the one concrete divine nature is indeed part of the historic trinitarian doctrine of the church. I then go on to argue that this part of the doctrine is vital if we are to give a satisfactory account of the unity of God. I explain why the traditional answer to this problem, in terms of the doctrine of divine simplicity, is an answer we cannot accept. Next, I provide examples that make the case that the doctrine is not, as claimed, self-contradictory. I conclude by offering a metaphysical account of the doctrine in terms of the theory of material constitution.

¹ Quotations from Yandell, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Yandell (2014).

A brief note is called for concerning the nature of the trinitarian Persons. I use 'Persons', with an upper-case 'P', to denote the trinitarian Three without being committed to a more definite account of what divine personhood amounts to. My own sympathies lie, as will become apparent, with social trinitarianism. That is, the Three are persons in something like the everyday sense of the term. I believe, however, that the issues concerning the divine nature remain much the same regardless of the answer to this question, *provided that* the Persons are seen as objectively existing realities, and not merely aspects or ways of speaking about what is ultimately an undifferentiated divine reality. We shall return briefly to this topic at the end of this essay.

The Tradition

It would be difficult to deny that the doctrine of a single concrete divine nature, common to all of the three Persons, is an integral part of trinitarian doctrine in the later Western church. Yandell notes Aquinas' assertion that "among creatures, the nature of the one generated is not numerically identical with the nature the one generating has ... But God begotten receives numerically the same nature God begetting has." (*ST*, Ia.39, 5 ad 2.245a).² This same view is held by Augustine; I cite here a couple of texts from his book on the Trinity. Consider his objection, in book 6, to the idea that the Trinity is "triple, or three by multiplication." (Augustine 1991, bk. 6, 212–13.) Here we may contrast the Trinity with a group of three men—say, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In such a group we have three individuals sharing a common (abstract) nature, but given the three of them there is "three times as much manhood" as in Abraham alone—in our terminology, three instances or tropes of human nature. But no such multiplication can exist in the case of the trinitarian Persons; unlike the "three men" case, those Persons have only one trope of divinity between them, which is why "the Father alone or the Son alone or the Holy Spirit alone is as great as Father and Son and Holy Spirit together." (Augustine 1991, bk. 6, 212.) Another telling passage occurs in book 7:

"If however being [*essentia*] is a species word like man, and those three which we call substances or persons have the same species in common, as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have in common the species which is called man; and if while man can be subdivided into Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it does not mean that one man can be subdivided into several single men—obviously he cannot, because one man is already a single man; then how can one being be subdivided into three substances or persons? For if being, like man, is a species, then one being is like one man." (Augustine 1991, bk. 7, 232–33.)

This requires some unpacking; both the syntax and the thought are complex. What I think Augustine means is this: While 'man' is a species-word, and the species man can

² Translated by Brian Leftow (2004, 305).

be subdivided (that is, exemplified multiple times), it does not follow that *an individual man* can be so divided. But then, neither can *an individual being* (in the divine case) be subdivided into three “substances³ or persons.” The argument has force precisely because Augustine assumes that the divine being (*essentia*) is individual and concrete, like a man, and not an abstract universal like “manhood.” (Otherwise, just as “man can be subdivided into Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” it would follow that “God can be subdivided into Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”) The divine *essentia*, in other words, consists of a single trope of Godhood or divinity.

Sometimes it is claimed that the Cappadocians, in particular Gregory of Nyssa, were in disagreement with Augustine on this point. The impression that this is the case gains plausibility from the fact that Gregory specifically invites us to apply to the Trinity the relationship between *hypostasis* and *ousia* as we understand it in the case of human beings: “If now you transfer to the doctrine of God the principle of differentiation between *ousia* and hypostasis that you acknowledge on the human level, you will not go astray” (Gregory of Nyssa 2000, 70).⁴ However, Gregory understands this relationship in the human case in a way that is truly surprising. Gregory admits that “Peter, James, and John, being in one human nature, are called three men.” (Gregory of Nyssa, “On ‘Not Three Gods,’ to Ablabius,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser. 5/331–36; 331.) Why then are not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who share the one divine nature, three Gods? Gregory’s response here is that it is actually a mistake, a “customary misuse of language,” to call Peter, James, and John “three men.” When referring to the plurality of individuals we ought to do so by some designation peculiar to them (for instance, by their names), rather than by the name of their common nature. To refer to them as “men,” in the plural, suggests that there are “many human natures,” which we know to be false.⁵ No doubt Gregory fails to convince us that it is really a mistake to refer to “men” in the plural. But what we need to attend to is his reason for insisting on this. He seems to think of the common essence of humanness as a *real unity* that somehow exists *as a whole* in each individual human being.⁶ But what sort of unity is this? To “divide” an abstract nature in the sense that it is exemplified multiple times does not pose any

³ This disjunct is included because Augustine is going along, at this point, with the Greek use of *hypostasis* for the trinitarian Persons, and he accepts the linguistic equivalence of *hypostasis* and *substantia*. However, he goes on to argue against the propriety of saying there are “three substances” in God (1991, bk. 7, 231).

⁴ This epistle is now generally believed to have been written by Gregory rather than Basil.

⁵ Christopher Stead remarks, “Gregory needs to convince us that Moses, Eunomius, and Cleopatra are ‘all one man!’” (Stead 1994, 184.)

⁶ “[Y]et their nature is one, at union in itself, and an absolutely indivisible unity, not capable of increase by addition or of diminution by subtraction, but in its essence being and continually remaining one, inseparable even though it appear in plurality, continuous, complete, and not divided with the individuals who participate in it” (*Ad Ablabium*, 332).

problem. If on the other hand we think of the *ousia* as a concrete property–instance—in our terminology, as a trope—then it seems perfectly plausible to suppose that there is a distinct trope for each individual human being. Gregory, however, needs to resist this precisely because *he intends to transfer to the Trinity the relation between ousia and hypostasis that obtains for human beings*. Having stated (perhaps unwisely) that the distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia* can be transposed directly from the human case to that of the Trinity, Gregory now has to interpret (we might rather say, to distort) the human situation in order to render it parallel with the conclusion he wants to draw concerning the Trinity. To make sense of all this, we have to recognize that for him the divine *ousia* is not merely an abstract set of properties, but rather something concrete and individual.

Before leaving this topic it is appropriate to remark that the notion of a fundamental difference over the doctrine of the Trinity between the Cappadocians and the Eastern tradition, on the one hand, and Augustine and the West on the other, has been largely discredited among patristic scholars. The possibility of appealing to the Cappadocians in order to show that there is not a united tradition on the point in question has little credibility.

The Cost of Rejection

Having documented the place held in the trinitarian tradition by the notion of a single concrete divine nature, we now proceed to consider the theological costs if this doctrine is rejected. These costs will differ, however, depending on the acceptance or rejection of another element of traditional trinitarian doctrine, namely the doctrine of “processions in God,” in other words the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession or spiration of the Holy Spirit. We consider briefly the views of two philosophers, who between them take both of the available options.

If one rejects both the single concrete divine nature and the derivation of the Son and Spirit from the Father, the problem is to retain any adequate affirmation of the unity of God. Keith Yandell proposes as a solution “the doctrine that the Father depends for existence on the Son and Holy Spirit, the Son depends for existence on the Father and Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit depends for existence on the Father and the Son.” In this way he replaces the one–sided derivation of Son and Spirit from the Father, postulated by the doctrine of processions, with a mutual dependence. But what sort of dependence is this? It cannot be causal dependence, according to Yandell, because the essential divine attribute of aseity is the property, *existing without being caused by anything else*. If the Persons are caused to exist by each other, then none of them exists *a se*, as Yandell insists that they must. The dependence, then, must be logical rather than causal. But it is difficult to see how this can work. If the Son’s existence logically presupposes the Father’s existence, then the Father’s existence must be logically prior to that of the Son. But then, since the dependence relation goes both ways, it follows Father’s existence

logically presupposes the Son's existence, and so it seems that it must be the Son's existence that is logically prior—but obviously, both cannot be true. Perhaps, then, what is necessary is the entire complex of Father plus Son plus Holy Spirit. That is to say:

N1. Necessarily, (Father + Son + Holy Spirit) exists.

This situation, however, is logically indistinguishable from the following:

N2. Necessarily, the Father exists, *and*,

N3. Necessarily, the Son exists, *and*,

N4. Necessarily, the Holy Spirit exists.⁷

Indeed, (N1–N4) seems to be precisely what Yandell has in mind; in a more recent article, he leans heavily on the claim that the Trinity is a “logically inseparable triad” as guaranteeing the divine unity.⁸ Contrary to what Yandell seems to think, however, (N1–N4) *completely fails* to secure any meaningful dependence relationship between the three divine Persons. Nothing whatever can exist if a necessary being fails to exist: If the number 37 is a necessary being, then it is impossible that you or I should exist and that number fail to exist—but this, of course, says nothing whatever about any meaningful dependence relation between each of us and that number. Indeed, the number 37, the mean distance between the earth and Mars, and the smell of avocado form a logically inseparable triad! (Even if there were no planets or avocados, the properties in question arguably are necessary existing abstract objects.) Similarly, (N1–N4) are consistent with the proposition that each of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is an *ultimate source of being*; each possesses a necessity that is in no way derived from any other being, and whatever further relationships may exist between them are subsequent to the existence of each Person, an existence which is not in any significant way bound up with the existence of either of the other Persons. If this is not tritheism, it comes far too close to that for comfort. But if both the unitary concrete divine nature and the processions are denied, it is hard to see how this conclusion can be avoided.

Our example of a philosopher who rejects the unitary concrete divine nature but affirms the processions is Richard Swinburne. In retaining the doctrine of processions, Swinburne rules out the possibility that each divine Person is an ultimate source of being. But how are we to understand the derivation of Son and Spirit from the Father? In an early article, Swinburne provides an interesting answer to this question: “if it is an overall best act that a solitary God share his essential almightiness, the only way in

⁷ Yandell affirms N2–N4 in “The Most Brutal and Inexcusable Error in Counting? Trinity and Consistency” (1994, 204).

⁸ See Yandell (2015, 162).

which this can be done is if he creates as a separate God what is God anyway, i.e., if he divides himself. The creation being everlasting, this is to be read as: he creates as a separate God what, but for his creative action, would be himself." (Swinburne 1988, 232) This asserts that what the Father communicates to the Son is not the entire concrete divine nature (as the tradition held), but rather a *part* of that nature, a part that, "but for his creative action, would be himself." The event in which God "divides himself" cannot, however, be a temporal event, since all three Persons must be eternal (that is, everlasting). Rather, the Father from all eternity brings it about that *two parts of the divine nature distinct from himself exist*, not as the Father's own nature (as they would be, apart from the processions), but rather as the natures of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, this explanation of the processions does not reappear in Swinburne's *The Christian God*, which otherwise incorporates a great deal of the content of the earlier article. This means, however, that in that book the question about the nature of the processions remains unanswered. Fortunately, Swinburne has clarified this topic in correspondence. He states, "in chapter 8 of *The Christian God*, I dropped the claim that the Son and the Spirit can only be 'created' if the Father 'divided himself.' I can't see any need for that requirement, and in any case I doubt that it makes any sense to talk of a non-physical being dividing itself—division only applies to extended and so physical substances." (Swinburne 1998, 232).⁹ He also says, "I avoid talk of the Father 'creating' the other members of the Trinity in the book, in deference to the normal usage of the fathers and scholastics that 'creates' only applies to the bringing about of something finite by an act of will." Does this mean, then, that the Son and the Spirit are brought into being *ex nihilo*? In response to this question, Swinburne states, "I'd prefer to say that the Son and the Spirit were 'brought about, but not brought about out of anything,' rather than that they were 'brought about from nothing.' The phrase '*ex nihilo*' caused a lot of trouble in the middle ages, when creation of the universe *ex nihilo* was understood by some as if being brought about from some pre-existing thing, 'nothing.'"

Swinburne's clarification is carefully hedged with qualifications, but it does clearly imply that both Son and Holy Spirit are *created beings*, though no doubt very different from all the other beings that they, in company with the Father, have subsequently created. In my book, I objected to this, stating that "None of the ancient Fathers, I believe, would have accepted that a person could be both fully divine ("true God," as they would say) and created, even in the special sense in which, according to Swinburne, the Son and the Spirit are created." (Hasker 2013, 154) In "The Social Theory of the Trinity," (2018) Swinburne addresses this point. He partially accepts my claim, agreeing that "none of the ancient Fathers ... would have accepted that a person could be both fully divine ... and created" (2018, 14; ellipses in original). Obviously, the

⁹ This and the following quotations are from private e-mails; my thanks to Richard Swinburne for permitting me to use them here.

omissions from my statement are important: he does not agree that the sense in which his view holds that Son and Spirit are “created” is a sense which the Fathers—and later orthodox trinitarian theologians—would have objected to. The differences from the more ordinary sort of creation are that (1) the creation of Son and Spirit is necessary (since creating them is the overall best thing for the Father to do), rather than contingent; and (2) they are not created out of any pre-existing materials (not even “nothing”). I must confess to being unconvinced by this; I doubt very much either that the ancients would, or that we should, accept a view according to which *being uncreated* is not an essential divine attribute which must be possessed by any divine Person. Readers must make what they will of this disagreement. In any case, I believe the point has been made: denying the unitary concrete divine nature imposes serious theological costs, costs we might well prefer to avoid.

A Simple Solution?

For many theologians there is a relatively straightforward solution to the problem at hand, in terms of the doctrine of divine simplicity. The point is nicely illustrated by some thoughts about Augustine’s view from patristic scholar Lewis Ayres: “The grammar of simplicity means that we must say that if God the Father is to generate another, a Son, both the generator and the generated must be wisdom and God in themselves: the grammar of simplicity allows us to say truly that ‘the Father has given the Son to have life in himself’ (John 5:26).” (Ayres 2004, 378f) So now we have the individual reality of both Father and Son (and, by implication, of the Spirit as well). “However, the language of divine simplicity enables and demands a further step. If the Son is wisdom itself, and the Father is wisdom itself, then we can go a step farther and say that the Son’s essence is identical with the Father’s essence. There cannot, obviously enough, be two instances of wisdom itself.” (Ayres 2004, 379) Ayres sums up this process of thought as follows: “The Father generates the Son who is light from light, wisdom from wisdom, and essence from essence. The Son is an essence in Himself, not just a relationship: to talk of the person of the Son is to talk of the Son’s essence. And yet, because the Father’s and the Son’s essences are truly simple, they are of one essence.... Thus, in using the grammar of simplicity to articulate a concept of Father, Son, and Spirit as each God, and as the one God, we find that the more we grasp the full reality of each person, the full depth of the being that they have from the Father, the more we are also forced to recognize the unity of their being.” (Ayres 2004, 379–80)

This is indeed an elegant intellectual structure, but a problem remains which Ayres seems not to have noticed—a problem which arises from the very concept of identity. Identity, as this notion is understood by logicians, is a transitive relation: if A is identical with B, and B with C, then A is identical with C. So if the Father is an essence in himself, and the Son also is an essence in himself, and yet their essences are identical, it follows

inexorably that the Father is identical with the Son, a heretical conclusion that cannot possibly be accepted—and of course, Augustine does not accept it. It does not help to point out at this juncture that Father and Son cannot be identical, because they are related by the “begetting” relation, a binary relation that a thing cannot have to itself. That is true enough, but it in no way cancels out the entailment noted from the concept of identity; it just brings out explicitly the contradictory character of the theological system so understood.

So far as I can see, there is no solution to this problem that is consistent with the strong doctrine of divine simplicity. It is tempting to point out that Augustine and the medievals did not have in mind the modern concept of identity, which in its fully articulated form is usually attributed to Leibniz. Perhaps they did not, but then the challenge for a contemporary scholar who wishes to defend their solution is to spell out the concept of identity which they were using, a concept which avoids the conclusion that each of the divine Persons is identical with each of the other two. *This challenge has not been met.* And I do not see how we could regard any concept of a relation which is not transitive as a concept of *identity*. In addition to all of its other deficiencies,¹⁰ the strong doctrine of simplicity entails that the doctrine of the Trinity, which affirms a real distinction between the divine Persons, is false.¹¹

Trinitarian Models

At this point I bring forward several models of the Trinity. These are not fully developed metaphysical accounts, but rather images or analogies which may help us in our thinking about trinitarian matters. We begin with some ideas of William Craig. As an analogy for the Trinity, Craig cites the three-headed dog Cerberus from Greco-Roman mythology. We suppose that “Cerberus has three brains and therefore three distinct states of consciousness of whatever it is like to be a dog.” (Moreland and Craig 2003, 593).¹² Thus, we have a single being—a single organism—with three distinct states of consciousness. Craig proposes that “once we give up divine simplicity, Cerberus does seem to represent what Augustine called an image of the Trinity among creatures.” However there is a problem: “suppose Cerberus were to be killed and his minds survive the death of his body. In what sense would they still be one being? ...Since the divine persons are, prior to the Incarnation, three unembodied minds, in virtue of what are

¹⁰ I have identified some of these deficiencies in “Is Divine Simplicity a Mistake?” (2016).

¹¹ To avoid misunderstanding, I should perhaps point out that there is a minimal concept of divine simplicity which should be accepted, and so far as I know is in fact accepted, by all theists. That concept is as follows: God is simple in that God is not assembled out of parts and cannot be decomposed into parts. Simplicity in this sense, however, does not provide a solution for the metaphysical problem of the Trinity.

¹² While the volume is co-authored, Craig is primarily responsible for the material on the Trinity.

they one being rather than three individual beings?" (*Ibid.*)

In order to resolve this problem, Craig invites us to reflect on the nature of the soul, which he takes to be an immaterial substance. He then reasons,

"Now God is very much like an unembodied soul; indeed, as a mental substance God just seems to be a soul. We naturally equate a rational soul with a person, since the human souls with which we are acquainted are persons. But the reason human souls are individual persons is because each soul is equipped with one set of rational faculties sufficient for being a person. Suppose, then, that God is a soul which is endowed with three complete sets of rational cognitive faculties, each sufficient for personhood. Then God, though one soul, would not be one person but three, for God would have three centers of self-consciousness, intentionality and volition, as social trinitarians maintain... God would therefore be one being that supports three persons, just as our own individual beings each support one person. Such a model of Trinity monotheism seems to give a clear sense to the classical formula, "three persons in one substance"" (Moreland and Craig 2003, 594).

Craig later clarified his proposal with a pair of qualifications. First, it is infelicitous to suggest that God possesses "three complete sets of rational *cognitive* faculties," since this seems to exclude affective and volitional faculties, which is not what Craig intended. So the word 'cognitive' should be omitted at that point. But secondly, it was not his intention to reify the faculties referred to, as is done in "faculty psychology." What is essential to the proposal is that it gives a model of God as a single being having "three distinct states of consciousness of whatever it is like to be God."

We now move to a proposal from a different source, namely Brian Leftow. Leftow's proposal is embedded in a complicated story involving time-travel, but that story need not detain us here. His constructive explanation concerning the nature of the trinitarian Persons is as follows:

"Suppose, then, that God's life has the following peculiar structure: at any point in our lives, three discrete parts of God's life are present. But this is ... because God always lives His life in three discrete strands at once, no event of His life occurring in more than one strand and no strand succeeding another. In one strand God lives the Father's life, in one the Son's, and in one the Spirit's. The events of each strand add up to the life of a Person. The lives of the Persons add up to the life God lives *as* the three Persons. There is one God, but He is many in the events of his life." (Leftow 2004, 312).

This proposal suffers rhetorically as a result of being separated from Leftow's longer story, but the intention should be clear: there is a single being, God—indeed, a single *person*; God for Leftow *is* a single person, in our modern sense of 'person'—who lives simultaneously in three discrete life-strands, the life-strands respectively of the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Leftow is quite insistent on the distinctness of the three strands: the strands do not have in common “any events composing [God’s] conscious life or involving His agency.” (Leftow 2004, 30 n. 22). Furthermore, “God does not live save as Father, Son and Spirit.... God’s life always consists of three other things which count as entire ongoing lives.” (Leftow 2004, 312).

Now, it is obvious that there are important differences between Craig’s and Leftow’s proposals. Craig is self-identified as a social trinitarian, whereas Leftow is a leading critic of social trinitarianism. We shall need to attend to this difference shortly. What should not be missed, however, is that each of them presents a picture in which a single being, God, has simultaneously three distinct life-strands, three self-contained series of experiences, belonging respectively to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We can say, then, that they share in affirming the *Trinitarian Possibility Postulate*:

(TPP) *It is possible for a single concrete divine nature—a single trope of deity—to support simultaneously three distinct lives, the lives belonging to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*

And now we must ask: *Is this in fact possible?* This question subdivides into two further questions: (1) Is this *logically or conceptually* possible, so that affirming it violates no constraints of logic or conceptual coherence? (2) Is this *metaphysically* possible, in the sense of being consistent with the ultimate nature of reality? Of these two questions, it is clearly the first that must occupy our attention here. If God is in fact a Trinity of the sort postulated, then the situation described by the possibility postulate is one that actually exists and *a fortiori* is also possible. If God is not a Trinity of this sort, then ultimate reality is inconsistent with the situation described by the postulate, which is therefore impossible. But since the nature of God as Trinity is precisely what is in dispute, neither conclusion on that point can be taken as a premise in order to answer our question as to the truth of (TPP). What we need to consider here, then, is whether (TPP) is logically coherent and free from contradiction. This, we will recall, is precisely the challenge that was presented by Yandell, in his reference to “what appears to be a self-contradictory doctrine to the effect that the trinitarian Persons all have the concrete divine nature.”

There is indeed one point at which the coherence of (TPP) has been questioned, and that point concerns the notion of “support” employed both in (TPP) and elsewhere. (Craig, we may recall, employed the same word in stating his own view.) I had stated that “‘Support’ here does not represent any obscure or technical notion; the term is used in the ordinary sense in which we can say that the human body/mind/soul ...‘supports’ the continuing conscious life of a human being.” (Hasker 2017, 228). Daniel Howard-Snyder, however, doesn’t think “there is any such thing as ‘the ordinary sense’ of the term” in such a context. He surmises that “few of [Hasker’s] peers, if any, will understand what he means by ‘support’.” (Howard-Snyder 2015, 108) Now, I am

hopeful that Howard–Snyder is overly pessimistic. I hope, that is to say, that at least a good many readers will not have greeted the trinitarian possibility postulate with blank incomprehension because of the allegedly unintelligible term ‘support’. Nevertheless, a bit more discussion is in order. Among the online *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definitions for ‘support’ some help is offered by 8b, “To maintain in being or in action; to keep up, keep going.” This does seem to fit fairly well what I (perhaps naively) cited as the “ordinary sense” of the word in such a context. Even more helpful, however, is 8d, “Of a computer, operating system, etc.: to allow the use or operation with it of (a program, language, device, etc.)” I doubt that very many readers would express puzzlement if I were to say that my desktop computer supports word processing, whereas my mobile phone does not. And this meaning seems to transfer very readily to my use of the word with regard to the brain’s “supporting” a person’s conscious life.

Another philosopher who finds the support relation puzzling is Dale Tuggy. Tuggy affirms that I “leave the meaning of ‘supports’ wholly unclear,” but he thinks that in reality the implications of such a relation are clear enough—and damaging to my view. He explains the idea as follows:

“In addition to, and as it were, beneath a human life, there is the one whose life it is, whether this self be thought to be a soul, a union of soul and body, a whole organism, the body, or a part of the body (e.g. the brain). It’s the doer of the actions in that life, the thinker of thoughts in that life, the experiencer of experiences in that life. What is this ‘supporting’ relation which exists between the human self and his or her life? It would seem that this self is the substance/being common to those events.

But then, for ‘the divine nature’ to play the needed role, it must be a self. Only a self can do things like plan, strive, know, love, command, obey, etc. Hasker faces a dilemma here. If he says that this ‘divine nature’ is a self, then he’s got four selves in the Trinity ...” (Tuggy, forthcoming).

It is in order to avoid this unwelcome conclusion, according to Tuggy, that I leave the meaning of ‘supports’ completely unclear. But on the contrary, as I am using ‘supports’ it *does not follow* that what does the supporting must be a self. There is no self involved when a computer supports various functions (though admittedly the functions are “cognitive” only in an extended and analogical sense). Nor would I say that when, as we know to be the case, some tiny module of brain–tissue supports some kind of cognitive processing, the module in question is a “self.” (For example, the human visual cortex comprises over thirty distinct processing sites, each of which supports a part of the process by which information is extracted from visual stimuli. Obviously, each site individually does not qualify as a “self”; nor does the visual cortex as a whole so qualify.) The notion that what supports mental life must be a self is one that Tuggy has constructed on his own, not one that he has derived from my usage of ‘supports’. And

since I have explicitly denied that the divine nature is a self or person, it seems inappropriate for Tuggy to assume that my usage of ‘supports’ entails precisely what I have denied.

Having said all this, I freely confess that I do not know, and am unable to describe in detail, exactly what happens when my brain/mind/soul supports the occurrence of some mental process; much less can I describe how the divine nature supports the mental life of a divine Person. But so far as I can tell, no one else knows these things either, so our talk about such matters retains an ineliminable element of vagueness, derived from the limitations of our knowledge of the world—and of God.

At this point I have to say that I am unaware of any further objections that pose a serious challenge to the logical and conceptual possibility affirmed by (TTP). The situation as described by Craig and Leftow (that is, the situation with regard to what is common in their two proposals) seems clearly conceivable; no evident incoherence or contradiction stands out as one thinks about it. It is also worth noticing that, whereas neither of their proposals has escaped criticism, none of the other criticisms I am aware of is such as to call in question the conceptual coherence of the situation as they describe it. And there is an important additional point that can be made in favor of the proposal: there is significant evidence that *on the human level* the sort of situation depicted by the possibility postulate does on occasion obtain. I refer here to the evidence from “split-brain” or commissurotomy cases, as well as from cases of multiple personality. Both these sorts of cases provide significant evidence that, under special circumstances, human beings can have two or more distinct streams of consciousness occurring simultaneously. I have discussed this evidence elsewhere and will not rehearse it here.¹³ The evidence remains controversial, but I believe the interpretation that allows for actual divided consciousness is better and more plausible than interpretations that seek to avoid that conclusion. Note, however, that I am *not* putting split-brain and multiple personality cases forward as models of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the fact that this apparently occurs among human beings under special circumstances does something to make it plausible that the sort of situation described by the (TPP) may be genuinely possible.

In view of all this, I assert that *the logical possibility of a single concrete divine nature supporting three distinct personal life-strands can be affirmed; there is no known evident or plausible objection to this possibility*. Admittedly, it would be desirable to have a more precise, well-developed metaphysical theory of the relation between the divine nature and the trinitarian Persons. This question will soon be addressed, but I want to emphasize that *the solution of the logical problem of the Trinity does not depend on such a developed metaphysical theory*. That problem of logical consistency can now be put behind

¹³ See Hasker (2010, 2013, and 2017).

us, whatever further difficulties may still lie in wait.

We need, however, to address briefly the difference between Craig's model and Leftow's. The difference, we recall, concerns where in the picture personhood, in the sense of our modern conception of a person, is to be located. For Craig, each of the "three centers of self-consciousness, intentionality and volition" postulated by his model counts as a person in a robust sense: the divine Persons are persons. For Leftow, there is just one person, namely God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are names of the three "life-strands" through which the one person, God, lives his life. How shall we decide between the two?

Both views, it seems to me, are conceptually coherent and intelligible, even if a bit strange in terms of our ordinary ways of thinking. I doubt that either view has a major advantage in terms of naturalness or intuitive plausibility. (One's judgment on those points is likely to be strongly influenced by one's prior inclinations in trinitarian theorizing.) I believe, however, that Craig's view has a large advantage with regard to coherence with the New Testament's witness to Jesus Christ. It is beyond question that the New Testament writings picture a rich relationship of personal interchange between Jesus and the Father. This relationship is, of course, conditioned by the Son's incarnate state, but it is considered by both Craig and Leftow, in agreement with the whole theological tradition, to be a relationship *between trinitarian Father and Son*. Craig is able to understand this in a natural way, as a personal relationship in a perfectly straightforward sense—that is, as a relation between two persons, the Father and the Son. (This has always been the main point of appeal for social trinitarianism.) For Leftow, things are not so simple. When Jesus prays, this for Leftow must in reality be *God praying to himself*. Especially poignant are the words of desolation from the cross: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" For Leftow, this apparently has to be read as, "Why have I—as-Father forsaken myself—as-Son?" In understanding this text, Leftow resorts to what I can only view as a desperate expedient: he suggests that, in his incarnate state, Jesus may not have been entirely clear about the nature of his relationship with the Father!¹⁴ Readers must judge for themselves the plausibility of that suggestion. But this disagreement between Craig and Leftow should not be allowed to obscure the agreement between them on other points, in particular about the trinitarian possibility postulate.

Trinitarian Metaphysics

Without doubt, it would be desirable to have a more explicit metaphysical account of the relation between the one concrete divine nature and the trinitarian Persons. I have

¹⁴ "It should not seem odd to us that someone should feel that he had forsaken himself if he was not aware that it was he himself who (he felt) was doing the forsaking." (Leftow 2012, 322.)

proposed a sketch of such an account, framed in terms of the metaphysical idea of constitution; this has proved to be one of the more controversial parts of my overall account of the Trinity. Now the very idea of constitution continues to be debated, and I cannot hope to settle that debate here. What I can do is render my application of the idea to the Trinity as clear as possible, and attempt to meet specific objections to that application. Those who are unpersuaded by the merits of the constitution relation will have to find their own solutions to the problems of trinitarian metaphysics. Indeed, it may very well prove to be a good thing to have several different approaches competing in this arena, so that eventually whichever approach best illuminates the situation may prevail. In the meantime, I can only do my best. I begin with a general discussion of the need for, and the plausibility of, the constitution relation.

A classic example is that of a statue made of gold. We have, in this case, both a lump of gold and a statue. However, it is important to see that, contrary to what we might at first think, the lump of gold *is not identical* with the statue. If they were identical, they would need to have all of their properties in common, but this is not the case. The statue has the property, *being such that it would no longer exist if the gold were hammered into a different shape*, but the lump of gold lacks this property; hammering would leave it still the same lump of gold. So we say that the lump of gold *constitutes* the statue, but it is *not identical with* the statue; rather, it is *distinct from* the statue. The lump could exist without constituting a statue, but, given certain circumstances (including the fact that it has been shaped in a certain way by an artist), there is indeed a statue which coincides spatially with the lump, and yet is (as we have seen) distinct from it. Once we have the basic idea of constitution in hand, many examples become evident. A piece of cloth, dyed in a certain way, constitutes a national flag, given that there is a nation that recognizes objects with that color–pattern as its flag. A piece of paper, manipulated according to certain legal conventions, constitutes a marriage license. And so on.

Admittedly, the constitution relation is not the only way one could handle examples such as these. We might for instance say that the statue is not an object distinct from the lump of gold, but is rather the lump of gold itself, called a “statue” at the present time in virtue of its present possession of certain accidental properties (the “circumstances” noted above). This has the perhaps awkward consequence that hammering the statue into a different shape would not destroy anything, something art–lovers might find difficult to swallow. Even harder to accept is the implication that if, for example, a cat is run over by a car and killed, nothing has been destroyed in this case either; it is merely that a certain mass of cat–tissue has been rearranged. What needs to be recognized is that *any solution to these problems is going to be counter–intuitive in some way*. My own view is that the description of the situation in terms of constitution has decided benefits as

compared with other options.¹⁵

We need, however, a more precise characterization of the constitution relation. I have proposed a definition of the relation based on the work of Lynne Rudder Baker. Her view of the relation makes essential use of two notions; the first is that of a *primary kind*. A thing's primary kind supplies the answer to the question, "What most fundamentally is x ?" (Baker 2000, 40). The other notion required is that of *circumstances*, a general term which covers the answers, in different cases, to the question, "In virtue of what is y the kind of thing that it is?" (*Ibid.*) If x constitutes y , it does so in virtue of certain circumstances in which x finds itself; lacking those circumstances, x might exist without constituting anything having y 's primary kind. "[I]t is in virtue of certain legal conventions that a particular piece of paper constitutes a marriage license; it is in virtue of the arrangement of molecules that something constitutes a block of ice; it is in virtue of its evolutionary history that a particular conglomerate of cells constitutes a human heart." (Baker 2000, 41) Given these notions of primary kind and circumstances, it is possible to give a definition of the relation of material constitution:

Suppose x has F as its primary kind, and y has G as its primary kind. Then x constitutes y at time t just in case

- (i) x and y are spatially coincident at t ;
- (ii) x is in "G-favorable circumstances" at t ;
- (iii) necessarily, if an object of primary kind F is in G-favorable circumstances at t , there is an object of primary kind G that is spatially coincident with that object at t ; and
- (iv) it is possible for x to exist at t but for there to be no object of primary kind G that is spatially coincident with x at t .¹⁶

This however is *material* constitution, but the desired application is to the Trinity: specifically, kind F is to be *divine essence*, and kind G is to be *Trinitarian Person*. Since the essence and the persons are omnipresent, spatial coincidence is not relevant for this application. And since the relation in question holds always if at all, the time-reference can be suppressed. Following a suggestion from Baker, I will now substitute for the first

¹⁵ An elaboration of the golden statue case makes the point. Suppose a vandal has broken into the museum and has used a hammer to beat the statue into a formless lump. Fortunately, an exact impression had been made of the undamaged statue. A mold is prepared from that impression, and the lump of gold is recast using that mold, with a result that is indistinguishable from the undamaged statue. It seems that the anti-constitucionalist is obliged to say that the original statue (=lump) has survived; certain accidental properties of the lump were altered temporarily but have now been restored. But this seems clearly false; the original statue does not survive. In order to count as the original statue, the object must have been given its present shape by the artist, or by someone working under the immediate direction of the artist.

¹⁶ Paraphrased from Baker (2000, 43).

clause of the definition, “(i) x and y are spatially coincident at t ,” the following: “(i*) x and y have all their parts in common.” The same substitution should of course be made in the other clauses of the definition. There is, however, another problem. This problem arises from clause (iv) of the schema: “it is possible for x to exist at t but for there to be no object of primary kind G that has all its parts in common with x .” Making the required substitutions we have (iv*) “it is possible for the divine nature to exist but for there to be no divine trinitarian person that has all its parts in common with that nature.” But *is* this possible? If we are speaking of metaphysical possibility, clearly not. If God is the Trinity, then the Trinity is an integral part of the fundamental structure of reality; there is no metaphysical possibility that there should not be the three trinitarian Persons. What we must be asking about, then, is conceptual possibility. We are asking, is it *consistent with the concept* of the divine nature, that it should exist without sustaining the existence of any divine trinitarian Person? Here, of course, everything depends on what concept of the divine nature we have in mind. If we are speaking of an explicitly trinitarian concept of the nature, then once again the answer must be negative; the nature so understood is *by definition* the nature of the trinitarian Persons. But this is not the only or, in this context, the most relevant concept that is available. We do have a general conception of the divine nature, describable in terms of Anselm’s definition of God as “the being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” There are disagreements about the specific attributes implied by this definition, but the definition itself is widely shared among theists, including non-trinitarian theists. So what we should be asking is this: Is it logically possible that a divine nature so conceived should exist without sustaining a trinitarian Person? To that question, I think the answer is Yes. If the answer were No, that would imply that unitarians, and with them Jews and Muslims, are making a simple logical mistake, but this is implausible. To answer the question in the negative would imply that there is available something like an ontological proof of the existence of the Trinity—but I know of no such proof, and I very much doubt that one will be produced. Understood in this way, then, I believe we can indeed affirm condition (iv*)—but it will be well to make explicit that what we are affirming is conceptual possibility and not metaphysical possibility.

In view of this, we have a revised definition of constitution that can be applied to the Trinity:

Suppose x has F as its primary kind, and y has G as its primary kind. Then x constitutes y just in case

- (i*) x and y have all their parts in common;
- (ii*) x is in “ G -favorable circumstances”;
- (iii*) necessarily, if an object of primary kind F is in G -favorable circumstances there is an object of primary kind G that has all its parts in common with that object; and

(iv*) it is conceptually possible for x to exist but for there to be no object of primary kind G that has all its parts in common with x .

The constituted kind (G in the schema) is divine trinitarian Person; the constituting kind (F in the schema) is divine mind/soul or concrete divine nature. Each Person is simple, in that it does not consist of separable parts; and so is the divine nature simple, so (i*) is satisfied. The divine nature constitutes the divine trinitarian Persons when it sustains simultaneously three divine life-streams, each life-stream including cognitive, affective, and volitional states. Since in fact the divine nature does sustain three such life-streams simultaneously, there are exactly three divine Persons.

As has been noted, the constitution relation is controversial, and some philosophers will be inclined to reject my account out of hand. If so, they are welcome to propose their own accounts of the relation between divine nature and trinitarian Persons; I cannot, of course, anticipate at this point what those other accounts might amount to. I can, however, address objections aimed specifically at my adaptation of constitution for trinitarian metaphysics. Such an objection has been presented by Keith Yandell. His objection arises from my example (borrowed from Michael Rea), in which a single piece of marble constitutes at once a supporting pillar for a building and a statue of a person. Yandell observes that tropes are of different types, and the trope of marble in my example is a "stuff" trope. "So if the example is to be extrapolated to heaven, then the divine essence must be a 'stuff' trope. What 'stuff' can it be?" Of course, there can be no answer to that question: God, as a simple being, is not made of stuff. But if the divine essence is not a kind of stuff, Yandell concludes, the notion of constitution is the wrong way to make sense of the Trinity.

This is ingenious but a little too quick. No doubt it is true that God is not, literally, made of stuff, but it might be that the divine essence plays a role that is in some way analogous to that played by stuff in more mundane situations. Michael Rea suggests, in his own trinitarian proposal, that the divine substance in the Trinity could "play the role of matter" in a form-matter compound, though "It can't *really* be matter, since God is immaterial." (Rea 2009, 419) Rea does not develop the idea at length, but it might be worth a further look. But why the fixation on the pillar-statue example in the first place? I offered that example simply because it provided a case of a single entity constituting a plurality of entities; I never said, or meant to suggest, that this parallels the Trinity in any other way. Yandell admits that there can be other sorts of tropes than stuff tropes, so why not consider other options? Think again of Craig's model, in which the divine "soul" supports at all times three distinct states of divine consciousness. What sort of trope is the "soul" trope in Craig's model? I think it is clear that Yandell has failed to make his case.

Another objection made by Yandell can be disposed of more briefly. He notes that my constitutionalist view requires me to hold that "it is possible for the divine nature to

exist but for there to be no divine trinitarian person that has all its parts in common with that nature.” (Yandell 2014). He concludes that “The price of applying Constitutionalism to God is holding that the divine essence might ‘some time or other’—and if some time or other, why not always?—exist without the Trinity existing!” (*Ibid.*). Unaccountably, he overlooks or ignores my saying, in the very same context, that

“we are not speaking here of real, metaphysical possibility. To repeat this once more: the divine Trinity is inherent in the ultimate structure of reality, so whatever is true of its nature is true of metaphysical necessity; contrary states of affairs are excluded by the fundamental nature of being. What we are asking about, then, is conceptual possibility” (*Ibid.*)

In other words, absence of logical contradiction. This objection depends on attributing to me a view I have explicitly denied.

Clearly, there are additional questions that could be asked here, and no doubt additional objections that could be raised. These ideas are not put forward as a completed theory, but more as what may be a promising line for future development. Alternative proposals are welcome, and may the best metaphysics win! At present, however, there is a shortage of viable alternative proposals.¹⁷ As we have seen, the most widely held alternative, divine simplicity, cannot succeed in its present form, though one can’t rule out the possibility of a revised version of simplicity that will do the job.

Coda: But What About the Hypostases?

Our discussion has been concerned primarily with the divine *ousia*, the essence that is common to the three divine Persons. But one cannot speak of the Trinity without speaking also of the hypostases, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And of course, we have not refrained from speaking of the Persons; in fact we have done so, for the most part, in terms congenial to social trinitarians, considering the three hypostases to be persons in something very like the ordinary, everyday sense of the term. (The main exception to this is Leftow’s view, in which there are three distinct “strands of consciousness” which yet fail to qualify as persons, properly speaking.) This might with some reason be put down to a prejudice on the author’s part. However, there is a noticeable lack of viable competitors, among trinitarian views that maintain a real, ontological distinction between the divine Persons.¹⁸ The dictum that the Persons are

¹⁷ Some philosophers hold that relative identity theories provide such an alternative. These theories are discussed in Hasker (2013, 119–38).

¹⁸ One referee agrees that this is true, if “what is meant is competitors within the current discussion among analytic theologians.” The referee maintains, however, that “There are more things in the writings of the church fathers than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” No doubt this is true, and if someone wishes

“subsisting relations” is just one more of the many unintelligible formulas that the doctrine of divine simplicity invites us to understand as transcendent wisdom. The view of Barth and Rahner, that the Persons are “modes of being” of the one God, is remarkably uninformative. The term is borrowed from the ancient Fathers, but not the meaning: for the ancients, the *tropoi hyparxeos*, the “modes of existing” of the Persons are the *personal properties* of “being begotten” on the part of the Son and “proceeding” on the part of the Spirit; the formula was not intended to tell us what a divine Person *is*. As things now stand, the formula “modes of being” stands for some sort of objective distinction within the deity that falls short of being a distinction of *persons*—but what such a “mode of being” might actually be is left wholly mysterious. The Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley, in a volume of theology devoted largely to the Trinity, says concerning the nature of Father, Son, and Spirit only that they are “personal entities so subtly distinguishable qua inherent relations that one can at best talk of each attracting the possibility of verb-forms, and then only in mutual ‘co-inherence’ with each other.” (Coakley 2013, 321). Make of that what you will! The social trinitarian affirmation that the divine Persons *are persons* is not warmly received by everyone. It has, all the same, some claim to being the only game in town.¹⁹

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to present one of their views as a coherent and viable proposal for contemporary trinitarian thought, they should certainly do so.

¹⁹ A slightly different version of this essay is published in Lincoln Harvey, ed., *Essays on the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018). Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers. www.wipfandstock.com

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