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Trinity: Mysterianism and the Problem of Meaninglessnes

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Abstract: The problem of the Trinity is often framed as a paradox between some propositions central to the doctrine of the Trinity that seem to be logically in tension with each other. However, a problem of Paradox presupposes that we have a sufficient understanding of the *meanings* of the propositions (otherwise we wouldn't even have any appearance of conflict between these meanings). My claim in this paper is that the main problem of the Trinity is more radical than a problem of Paradox: it's rather a problem of Meaninglessness, in the sense that the difficult challenge is to *grasp a meaning* for the central propositions of the doctrine (not to render logically compatible some meanings clearly grasped). I show how we can respond to the problem of Meaninglessness and how, once we have solved it, there is no need to try and dissolve the appearance of contradiction which constitutes the problem of Paradox. As far as the problem of Paradox goes, the solution adopted here is therefore a form of Mysterianism.

Keywords: Trinity, Mysterianism, Insight, Grasping the Meaning, Paradox

The approach to the problem of the Trinity that I am going to defend falls in the family of views called "Mysterianism"[1]. Mysterianism doesn't pretend to offer a "solution" to the paradox of the Trinity. Rather, it consists in saying that we *shouldn't try* to solve the paradox of the Trinity. Why shouldn't we try to solve the paradox? James Anderson (2007), a defender of Mysterianism, gives two main reasons: first, because paradoxicality in itself isn't a problem at all (it can be completely rational to hold on to *apparently* contradictory claims, so long as we have religious reasons to believe that the contradiction is merely apparent). Second, because in the case of the Trinity (and some other Christian mysteries like Incarnation), we have reasons to believe that we are *unable* to dissipate the apparent paradox (because God is incomprehensible). "Solving" the paradox of

[1] As far as I am aware, the term "mysterianism" as applied to the problem of the Trinity was first used by Dale Tuggy (2009) in order to characterize Anderson's view (Anderson 2007). Before that, the same word was used in the debate on Free Will (see for instance Ekstrom 2003) to characterize Peter van Inwagen's position (Van Inwagen 1998). I am not aware of any earlier use of the word.

the Trinity is something we don't *need* to do and something we *cannot* achieve, therefore we shouldn't try to do it.

My reasons for adopting a mysterianist stance in the case of the Trinity are slightly different from Anderson's. For one thing, I am not convinced that the incomprehensibility of God entails the impossibility to solve *any* paradoxes in theology. This seems to me to be an unjustifiably pessimistic claim. Second, I think that if we did have a full-blown paradox of the Trinity, then we would be better off solving it. Nevertheless, I believe that: (1) in the case of the Trinity, there is in fact no problem of paradoxicality; (2) but there *is* a problem of the Trinity, which I will call "the problem of meaninglessness", and the traditional focus on the "problem of paradoxicality" only distracts our attention from the real problem of the Trinity.

What is this "real" problem of the Trinity I am referring to? In short, the challenge is to determine whether believers (in the doctrine of the Trinity) *mean* anything at all when they claim to believe in this doctrine. Are they just repeating a string of words that is meaningless to them, or is there some content that is thereby believed? Of course, if they are just repeating a meaningless string of words, there is no problem of paradox—since a paradox is an apparent contradiction between *meaningful* sentences. But there is in this case a much more worrisome problem, which is that they cannot even be said to *believe* the doctrine (since there is no grasped *content* for them to believe in).

In the first section, I will show why the real problem of the Trinity is not a problem of apparent contradiction (i.e. a paradox) but rather a problem of meaninglessness. In the second section, I will provide some elements of a theory of meaningful belief. In the third and fourth sections, I will show how to determine the meaning of some superficially contradictory sentences (starting with an example, and then applying the same methodology to the case of the Trinity). In the last section, I will explain how this theory of the Meaning of the Trinity offers a (mysterianist) solution to the problem of Meaninglessness (but *not* to the problem of paradoxicality).

1. The Problem of Contradiction and the Problem of Meaninglessness

The traditional approach to the problem of the Trinity presents the problem as a *paradox* that needs to be *solved* somehow. The two tenets of this approach are as follows:

> (1) there is an apparent contradiction in the doctrine,
> (2) this apparent contradiction should be dissipated in order to show that the Christian faith isn't irrational.

In this second tenet, we see that the problem of the Trinity is (usually) considered as a problem for *apologetics*, i.e. the *defence* of the rationality and credibility of the Christian faith.[2]

My understanding of the problem of the Trinity is the exact opposite: I believe that the real problem of the Trinity has nothing to do with an "apparent contradiction", and furthermore I believe that the real problem (which I shall call the problem of Meaninglessness) has nothing to do with the rationality of the Christian belief in Trinity, but rather with whether Christians *have* that belief in the first place. This second problem was well expressed by Rahner:

> Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists.' (Rahner 1997, 10)

If we follow Rahner, there is a serious risk that many (common) Christians profess a verbal "belief" in the Trinity, but that this belief is *meaningless* (for them)[3].

At first sight, it might seem as though the two kinds of "problems" are completely different and without any clear relationship between each other. (Maybe there are *both* "problems" at the same time?) But my claim is that the former (the problem of contradiction) is superficial and tends to *hide* the seriousness of the latter (the problem of meaninglessness)[4].

I will start with the (alleged) problem of contradiction and will try to show why, at the end of the day, that problem is not a serious one and, when properly understood, leads us back to the (serious) problem of meaninglessness.

First of all, what is a problem of contradiction in general (in theology)? A problem of contradiction for *any* theological doctrine D appears when the authoritative sentences that constitute the doctrine seem to generate a contradiction.[5] A believer (or a theologian) who is neither a fideist nor a dialetheist will have to believe that this contradiction is a *merely apparent*

[2] Apologetics can be either *internal* or *external*: external apologetics is addressed to non-believers, while internal apologetics is addressed to believers themselves, and is an effort done by believers to avoid fideism—a conception of faith as being wholly separated from (and in opposition to) reason. The problem of the Trinity conceived as a problem of apologetics could be conceived as either external (responding to objections from non-Christians) or internal (an effort of *fides quaerens intellectum*).

[3] More below on what I mean by "meaningless belief".

[4] More below on why I, like Rahner, take this problem to be *serious*.

[5] I take a doctrine—like a theory—to be a set of *sentences* in a language (or in several languages), not a set of *propositions* or interpreted sentences. A doctrine is something that is defined by an authority (either Scripture or Magisterium) which determines authoritative pronouncements in a language (and sometimes its authoritative translations in other languages). That's why a doctrine can be (and needs to be) interpreted.

contradiction.[6] But there are in fact two different ways in which a set of sentences D can (mistakenly) seem to generate a contradiction:

> (a) Sentences in D seem to have meanings M1, M2, … Mn, and M1, M2, … Mn generate a contradiction (but sentences in D have in fact other meanings, which do not generate a contradiction).
> (b) Sentences in D have meanings M1, M2, … Mn, and M1, M2, … Mn seem to generate a contradiction (but these meanings do not in fact generate a contradiction).

There are some problems in theology which are (most likely) instances of (b). For example, the problem of evil or the problem of divine knowledge of future contingents. In the classical debate between Mackie (1955) and Plantinga (1974) about the problem of evil, the proper interpretation of the main sentences of the problem was not part of the discussion: all parties agreed about what it is for God to be wholly good and omnipotent, and about what it is for there to be evil in the world. The debate was whether it was possible to derive a contradiction from the (clearly grasped) meanings of the sentences (the propositions). It *seemed* to Mackie that it was possible; Plantinga tried to show that the contradiction was only apparent by providing a model in which the various propositions were true at the same time. For theologians who consider that God's knowledge of future contingents is a matter of settled doctrine, there is also an apparent contradiction between this kind of divine knowledge on the one hand, and the freedom of future human actions on the other hand. Here again, it doesn't seem that we can situate the problem just at the semantic level: it seems that we all know what it means for future actions to be free[7], and that we all know what it means that "God knows" so and so[8]. The problem (arguably) is rather that these grasped meanings (the propositions) seem (perhaps mistakenly) to generate a contradiction. And the solution would have to be a *model* which reconciles the various propositions (not a *semantic* which clarifies the meanings of the terms).

My first claim is that the real problem for the Doctrine of the Trinity is not one of these. I am not saying that there aren't formulations of a problem of the Trinity in which there is an apparent contradiction between some authoritative sentences.

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[6] Anderson (2007), who has studied carefully the problem of contradictions in theology, has introduced the important notion of a MACRUE: a Merely Apparent Contradiction Resulting from an Unarticulated Equivocation. The notion of a MACRUE is a sub-species of the "merely apparent contradiction" I am talking about here. More on MACRUEs in section 3 below.

[7] Maybe we can't *formulate* an explicit semantic for these sentences. My claim is only this: a sentence like "this action is free" is not one that would commonly generate the reaction "I have no idea what you mean".

[8] I set aside here the possible worries of classical theists who might use the notion of "analogy" and defend that we don't grasp the *analogical* meaning in which God "knows" anything.

There are. But whenever there is such an apparent contradiction, it can always be shown easily that we are in situation (a), i.e. that the appearance of a contradiction comes from the fact that we have taken the sentences to mean something which, in fact, they do not really mean.[9] Let me explain this claim with a couple of examples of apparent contradictions in Trinity.

I will start with some examples of "apparent contradictions" that are obviously superficial. Sometimes, when a non-Christian brings up the problem of the Trinity as an objection to Christian belief, what they later on formulate as "the paradox" shows a clear misunderstanding of (or lack of basic information about) the doctrine of the Trinity. One might say for instance "the doctrine of the Trinity says that there is only one God and at the same time there are three Gods, that's contradictory!". But of course, this is emphatically not what the doctrine says—the doctrine says that there is one God, not three Gods (though there are three divine persons). Other objectors might say "the doctrine of the Trinity says that God is a person and at the same time that God is three persons, that's contradictory!". But that again is *not* what the doctrine says—the doctrine says that there is one God and three persons. A somewhat more refined objector might say: "the doctrine of the Trinity says that in God there is one substance and three persons, but persons are substances so that's one substance and three substances at the same time, that's contradictory!" But this objection shows again a misunderstanding of the doctrine: in the Greek sense of "person" (*hypostasis*) and "substance" (*ousia*) it is not the case that every *hypostasis* is necessarily an *ousia*. The objector may complain that she doesn't know what "*hypostasis*" and "*ousia*" mean, but that is exactly the point I am trying to make here: that the problem is not a problem of seeing an (apparent) contradiction between two meanings clearly grasped, but rather a problem of grasping the meaning in the first place—the problem of knowing what it is that is being said. My general claim is that this is exactly what happens in all alleged cases of a "problem of contradiction" for the Doctrine of the Trinity.

In the previous examples, it is fairly easy to show that the objector is just assuming an interpretation of the doctrine that has little to do with the actual doctrine. To be fair, this general remark is not obviously true of all objectors and all formulations of a "problem of contradiction". Indeed, the classical version of the "logical problem of the Trinity", first offered by Richard Cartwright (1987), seems to present a more plausible candidate of apparent contradiction in the sense of (b), because it avoids using technical words whose meaning might me ignored (such as *ousia*, *hypostasis* or *homoousios*).

[9] Other authors who consider the problem of apparent contradiction for the doctrine of the Trinity to be of kind (a) seem to include, for instance (Jedwab and Keller 2019).

The logical problem of evil is classically presented as a Trilemma (and I'll refer to it as "the Trilemma"):

> the doctrine of the Trinity says that
> (1) a. Jesus is God.
> b. The Father is God.[10]
> (2) Jesus is not the Father.
> (3) There is only one God.
> And (1–2–3) are contradictory.

It must be acknowledged that the Trilemma comes very close to one traditional wording of the doctrine (in the Athanasian Creed), and it is hard to deny that the conjunction (1–2–3) has a paradoxical ring. Indeed, most Christian philosophers who have worked on the problem of the Trinity (see Branson 2014, 9) have worked from some version or other of the Trilemma, and have attempted to dissipate the apparent contradiction. Does that mean that the doctrine of the Trinity in itself is paradoxical after all, *even when* its meaning is well understood? I don't think so.

In my view, even the Trilemma raises in fact a problem of type (a) (i.e. a problem of getting what is being said), and not a problem of type (b) (i.e. an apparent contradiction once we understand clearly what is being said). The reason why we don't see it clearly in the case of the Trilemma is because the formulation of the Trilemma is deceptively simple. It *seems* not to require any effort of interpretation in order to get at the meaning of the sentences. But in fact, the Trilemma generates a paradox *only* under some interpretative assumptions—assumptions about the meaning of "is", which can be interpreted either as an "is" of identity or an "is" of sortal predication. In order to generate a real problem for the doctrine of the Trinity, we *have* to add the following premises to premises (1–2–3):

> (4) "is" in (1)a-b can only be either (twice) an "is" of sortal predication or (twice) an "is" of identity[11]
> (5) If "is" is (twice) an "is" of sortal predication, then there are (at least) two Gods (contra 3)
> (6) If "is" is (twice) an "is" of identity, then the father is the son (contra 2)

[10] We could add "c. the Holy Spirit is God", but that complicates the Trilemma without raising any further logical problem. The problem of the "Trinity" has nothing to do with the fact that the number of persons is three—with two persons, the problem remains exactly the same. That's why, for the purposes of this paper, I will only talk about the Father and the Son—the reader can easily add the Holy Spirit.

[11] These are exactly the two interpretations examined by Cartwright (1987).

(C) Therefore, there is *no possible meaning* for (1)a-b that avoids being in contradiction with (2) & (3).

This problem is clearly not a problem of apparent contradiction between clearly grasped meanings (type b). For one thing, even someone who considers this problem to be a serious one should acknowledge that it is clearly unclear whether "is" should be interpreted as (twice) an "is" of sortal predication *or* (twice) an "is" of identity. Furthermore, as Cartwright himself mentioned, it is far from clear that the sortal predicative and the identity sense of "is" are the only possible interpretations here[12]. It might be that sentences (1)a-b *seem* to be meant (or could *plausibly* be taken to be meant) with an "is" of sortal predication or identity. But this is only an appearance of meaning (problem (a)). And the competent Christian theologian will quickly respond that "Jesus is God" *doesn't* mean and *never* meant that Jesus is *identical* with the unique (triune) God; neither does it mean nor did ever mean that "Jesus is a God" (sortal predication) *just like* "the Father is a God". The competent theologian will rule out both interpretations of premise (4) as being historical misrepresentations of what the (historical) doctrine was meant to say. Perhaps these misrepresentations are a bit less obvious than the ones mentioned above (e.g. "the doctrine says both that there is one God and that there are three Gods"), but the theological verdict will be the same against the objector who thinks she has found an apparent contradiction between (clearly grasped) meanings of the doctrine. The verdict is: you simply haven't grasped the meaning of the doctrine.

As a result, not only is it the case that the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't generate a problem of type (b)—i.e. an apparent contradiction between propositions actually meant and clearly grasped, that would need to be dissolved via model construction. But we can also add that there is no *serious* problem of type (a): granted, an uninformed reader of the sentences of the doctrine could (plausibly) take them to have some meanings that generate a contradiction. But in such situations, historical theological information will always suffice to show her that the doctrine doesn't mean and never meant what she initially took it to mean.[13]

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[12] "The verb 'to be' is remarkably versatile. We say such things as: 'that speck on the horizon is a destroyer'; 'the sound you hear is a jet'; 'that's burley'; 'the desk is walnut'; 'Gielgud is Hamlet'; 'the Apostles are twelve'; 'the population of Boston is decreasing'; 'that is Descartes' (pointing to a picture); 'that is the Sonesta Hotel' (pointing to a reflection in the water); 'that is the Fuller Brush man' (pointing to a foot in the doorway). Each of these suggests a possible construal of our Trinitarian sentences, and a full treatment would take account of them all." (*ibidem*)

[13] A reviewer suggested that, even though there is not a problem of apparent contradiction for the sentences of the doctrine itself, there might be (different) problems of apparent contradiction for the various *interpretations* of the doctrine that have been proposed in the history of Christianity (such as the so-called social Trinity or Latin Trinity, for instance), or perhaps for some of them.

Does all this imply that there is no problem *at all* for the doctrine of the Trinity? It doesn't. And the reason has to do with the way in which the competent theologian can dispose of the superficial problem of type (a). When the objector thinks that the doctrine says (for instance) that there are three persons even though God is one unique person, the theologian will dispose of this objection by mentioning that the technical meaning of "*hypostasis*" is not our contemporary meaning of a "person". When the objector thinks that she understood "Jesus is God" as being either a claim of sortal predication or of identity, the theologian will respond that it means neither of those. But then the objector will (and should) respond: "but then what *does* it mean, if it doesn't mean anything of what it seems to mean?" The new problem is not one of contradiction (apparent or otherwise): it is a difficulty to get at any meaning at all. And it is not just a problem for the non-Christian who might start suspecting that the doctrine doesn't have any meaning at all. It is also a problem for the believers themselves, if all they can do to dispose of objections is *negate* some meanings, but cannot grasp any positive content for them to believe in. To repeat Rahner's worry, there is a serious risk that common believers only utter the *words* of the doctrine of the Trinity, without being able to give them any meaning in which they might believe. For some theological doctrines, it might not be a serious problem if their actual meaning is known by some specialized theologians, rather than by all Christians. But the doctrine of the Trinity seems to belong to the core of the Christian faith, and (unlike perhaps some other religions) a central element of the Christian faith (though not the only element, obviously) is propositional *belief*. According to Christian theology, salvation normally requires having a certain minimal set of beliefs, and therefore it requires *grasping* the meaning of a certain minimal set of sentences. It seems hard to deny that the doctrine of the Trinity, in the name of which all Christians are baptized, belongs to this *minimal* set that requires understanding.

To summarize, my central claim is that:

> (T) the real problem of the Trinity is *to grasp the meaning of the doctrine in the first place*, and *not* to reconcile some contradictory elements of a clearly grasped meaning.

This might be true. And such problems of contradiction (apparent… or perhaps real) might be of interest to the theologian who studies this or that interpretation in particular. But it fails to constitute a (serious) problem of *apologetics.* Apologetics is a defence of the content of the *Faith.* These interpretations are perhaps "traditional" in a historical sense, but not in any sense that would make them *authoritative* for the Faith (under any conception of Christian sources). As a result, if it should happen that one of these interpretations faces a problem of apparent contradiction, that would constitute a *prima facie* reason (for the believer) to think that this interpretation is incorrect (that the authoritative *doctrine* means somethings else)—and *not* a reason to think that some work needs to be done to offer a consistent model of this interpretation.

The problem, then, is to determine whether believers really *mean* anything at all with the words "trinity", "substance / *ousia*", "persons / *hypostaseis*", etc. Are these words mere *flatus vocis*, mere sounds? Is it the case then, that many (or even most?) Christians do not *really* believe in the Trinity? And if it is the case, how can we solve this very worrying situation? Such is the problem of meaninglessness.

In order to clarify the problem, I would like to make a few conceptual distinctions first. I will first distinguish "verbal belief" from "meaningful belief", and in the second category, I will then distinguish "proper meaningful belief" from "meaningful belief by accident".

By **verbal belief (or belief *de sententia*)**, I mean a belief the content of which is explicitly *about* a certain sentence *S*. The content of such a belief has the following form: "I believe that *this sentence S expresses a true proposition*". Notice that you can have a verbal belief without having *any* idea about the meaning of sentence *S*. Imagine for instance that a reliable friend of yours writes a sentence on a small piece of paper, then folds it and hands it to you saying: "don't open this piece of paper; give it to *X*, it contains very important—true—information for him." In this context, you could justifiably form the belief that "the sentence written on this piece of paper expresses a true proposition", even though you have no idea what that sentence is. The case is probably not so different for complex scientific sentences that we learn long before we can understand them: when a young child hears that "Einstein has proved that $e=mc^2$", and when she comes to believe "$e=mc^2$" because of this report, her belief in this sentence is little more than merely verbal. She believes that the sentence "$e=mc^2$" expresses some true proposition in Einstein's lingo, but she probably has no clue what that proposition is (indeed, she doesn't possess the conceptual apparatus to *conceive* that proposition, let alone to identify and recognize it).

By **meaningful belief (or belief *de propositione*)**, I mean a belief the content of which is the proposition itself expressed by the sentence corresponding to the belief. When I believe that the cat is on the mat, I don't merely believe that the sentence "the cat is on the mat" expresses *some* true proposition. I believe the proposition itself that is expressed by "the cat is on the mat". Notice that I *also* believe that the sentence "the cat is on the mat" expresses a true proposition. So a meaningful belief, in general, is one in which I believe both that the sentence *S* expresses a true proposition *and* the proposition itself that is expressed by the sentence. But this conjunction could in fact happen in two different ways, one accidental and one non-accidental.

By **proper meaningful belief**, I mean a belief that satisfies the following three criteria: (i) I believe that sentence *S* expresses a true proposition, (ii) I know that the proposition expressed by *S* is *p*, and (iii) I believe that *p*. Notice that the third

clause is now redundant, at least for a coherent thinker: if I am coherent, and I know that *S* expresses *p*, then I should either believe both *S* and *p* or disbelieve both *S* and *p*. For example, suppose I open the folded piece of paper that my friend handed to me and I read "Robert loves Lisa", then I will automatically come to believe *that* Robert loves Lisa *precisely because* I already knew that the sentence written on that piece of paper expressed a true proposition.

By **meaningful belief by accident**, I mean a belief that satisfies the two conditions for being a meaningful belief—I believe that *S* expresses a true proposition, and I happen to believe the proposition *p* that is actually expressed by *S*—but I satisfy both conditions as a matter of sheer luck. That is: I have no clue what sentence *S* means (or perhaps I *think* I know what it means, but I am mistaken—it means *p* and I take it to mean *q*), but *as it happens*, I also believe the proposition *p* for other independent reasons. This might happen when you receive a letter from a renowned scientist of your field, written in a language you do not know. You will form the belief that these sentences express true propositions; and (if it is your field), there is some chance that you already believe the propositions that are in fact expressed. So you have "meaningful belief" in the content of the letter (you have more than mere verbal belief since you believe in the propositions expressed), but your belief is meaningful only "by accident" since you do not know which of your beliefs correspond to the true sentences of the letter.

Let us now apply these distinctions to the case of the Trinity. We have here three possibilities: mere verbal belief in the Trinity, proper meaningful belief in the Trinity, or meaningful belief in the Trinity by accident. We might wonder what kind of belief sophisticated theologians have. But the problem of meaninglessness we're addressing here concerns more the "common believer", or as the scholastics used to say, the *vetula* (the illiterate but pious old woman).

I must say that I am quite pessimistic about the *vetula* having *proper* meaningful belief in the fundamental tenets of the doctrine of the Trinity. For instance, when the *vetula* (Latin or Greek) recites the Nicene creed and says that the Son is "*consubstantialem Patri*" (or "*homoousios*"), I very much doubt that she has any distinct understanding of what that phrase is supposed to mean. This, of course, doesn't mean that she is speaking in bad faith when she says that she believes *that*. She honestly believes that this sentence expresses a true proposition. But she very probably has no clue what that proposition is. Does that entail that she has merely verbal belief? Not necessarily! It might so happen that the *vetula* also believes the proposition expressed by "the Son is *homoousios* with the Father" without her knowing that it is precisely this proposition that is expressed by this sentence. In other words, it might be that she has meaningful belief by accident.

Since common believers (the *vetula*) quite certainly lack proper meaningful belief in the Trinity, the question then is whether their belief in the Trinity is

merely verbal or rather meaningful by accident. I think it would be terrible if it turned out that common Christian believers have mere verbal belief in the Trinity (for reasons mentioned above, about the relationship between saving faith and propositional belief). That's why I'm interested in determining the conditions under which we could say that common believers have *meaningful belief by accident*. What are the conditions to be met in order to have such a belief in the Trinity? This is the question I will try to answer in this paper.

To sum up this section, I have argued (1) that the real problem of the Trinity isn't the problem of apparent contradiction in the doctrine (neither of type (a) nor of type (b)), but rather the problem of whether those who believe in the doctrine are able to grasp any meaning at all; and (2) that this problem is a serious spiritual problem for believers, which has nothing to do with the apologetical problems (problems of showing the rationality of the content of revelation, like the problem of evil, or the problem of divine knowledge of future contingents). The main question then is the following: do common believers (the *vetula*) have more than a mere *verbal belief* in the Trinity? Do they have *meaningful belief* in the Trinity—if not *proper* meaningful belief, at least by accident?

In order to respond to this question, I will have to provide first some elements of a theory of what is to grasp a meaning.

2. What is it to "grasp the meaning" of a sentence?

What is it for a Christian believer to possess the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity? More generally, what is it for anyone to possess, or to grasp a certain meaning? Or what is it to associate a sentence with a certain "grasped meaning"?

In this section, I am going to present elements of a theory of "grasping a meaning". And I am going to present two possible elements for such a theory, which I will call the way of "insight" and the way of "inference". In order to understand this section, it is very important to make clear that I am *not* trying to offer here a theory of meaning itself. As we saw in the previous section, what I am interested in is not whether the sentences of the doctrine *have a meaning at all*; rather, I am interested in whether the meaning they have is *grasped* by those who believe in their truth (*de sententia*). In the previous section, I said that in the absence of such a grasping, the belief would be purely *verbal* and not *meaningful belief*. This requires a clarification: strictly speaking, a purely verbal belief ("that *this sentence S expresses a true proposition*") has the same *truth-conditions* as the corresponding belief *de propositione* ("that *p*", where *p* is the meaning of sentence *S*). Therefore, according to classical semantic theory of meaning (applied now to the meaning of mental states, not to the meaning of linguistic expressions), it would be possible to say that even a purely verbal belief *has meaning*. In fact, I

have no objection against this view about the meaning of the belief itself.[14] When I said that a purely verbal belief is not "meaningful", I only meant that "it is not meaningful *for the believer* herself", which is just another way to say that its meaning is not *grasped* by the believer. Therefore, what I am looking for is not a theory of what it is for a sentence to have such and such a meaning, nor a theory of what it is for a belief to have such and such a meaning: I am looking for a theory of what it is for an agent to *grasp* the meaning of a sentence or of her own belief.

This distinction is particularly important in order to appreciate the "internalist" aspect of both elements I will propose. Both "insight" and "ability to draw inferences" are elements of the mental life of the agent (and in principle accessible to introspection). Therefore, if they were taken to be theories of the meanings of sentences, this would commit me to a strongly internalist and mentalist semantics, which is widely rejected in contemporary debates. But I am endorsing here no such commitment. As far as my claims go, the *meaning* itself of a sentence may be an entity as externalist as one wants; but *grasping* the meaning would make no sense if it made no difference to the mental life of the agent. It seems obvious that "grasping the meaning" involves something in the mental life of the agent—at the very least as a necessary condition, if not a necessary and sufficient condition. There *must* be a phenomenology of "grasping a meaning"; it must "feel like something". To be even more prudent, then, what I am offering in this section are elements of a theory of *the mental necessary conditions* on "grasping a meaning". If there are further, externalist, conditions on grasping (and there might be, as far as I'll defend here), I won't talk about them.

One might wonder whether such a project (a phenomenology of the grasping of a meaning) does not presuppose a minimum of preliminary theory of meaning itself: after all, before we can know what it is to grasp a meaning, it seems that we should make clear what is the meaning itself, the grasping of which we are interested in. For instance, if we suppose a possible worlds semantics, in which the meanings of sentences are propositions, conceived as sets of possible worlds (or perhaps functions from circumstances of evaluation to sets of possible worlds, see Speaks 2021, sect. 2.1.5), then knowing that meanings are these kinds of things might be important before we can determine how to grasp them.[15] I think this worry might be justified if there are externalist conditions on "grasping a meaning" and if we are interested in describing them. But, as I said, I am here interested *only* in the internalist conditions on "grasping the meaning", on the phenomenology of it. And, even if meanings are in fact to be understood in terms

[14] In particular, I do *not* want to defend an internalist semantic theory, according to which the meaning of a sentence or a belief doesn't have to assign truth-conditions in the external world. See (Speaks 2021, sect. 2.2.2 and 2.2.3).

[15] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

of sets of possible worlds (or functions to sets of possible worlds), it seems phenomenologically obvious that no one who ever understood or "grasped the meaning" of a sentence had possible worlds *as part of her phenomenology* of understanding. We just *know* what our phenomenology of understanding (or "grasping a meaning") feels like long before any philosopher of language gives us an essentialist analysis of what meanings truly are. This is why, in this section, I will remain completely neutral about the correct theory of meaning itself.[16]

What we are looking for, then, are elements that could constitute the phenomenology of "grasping the meaning" of a sentence. I can see two plausible candidates for such a phenomenology.[17]

First, "grasping the meaning" of a sentence could require associating the sentence with a certain mental or intellectual "insight". In this sense, a claim like "I know what that means" implies "this sentence produces in me a certain insight". And conversely, "I don't know what that means" conveys the following message: "it produces no insight at all in my mind".

Second, "grasping the meaning" of a sentence could require being able to draw inferences from that sentence (to further sentences). In that sense, the claim "I don't know what that means" would be convey the following piece of information: "I have no clue where to go from there" or "I don't know what to make of that".

Notice that you can "grasp the meaning" of a sentence in the sense of having an insight without being able to draw inferences from there. The converse would seem to be phenomenologically more surprising, though it doesn't seem to be metaphysically impossible. (Think of someone who would report having no insight at all about the meaning of the sentence, and could nonetheless draw coherent inferences from it.[18] Certainly, we would wonder where these inferences come from—and he would probably be surprised about his own ability too.) That is just to show that these two criteria for grasping the meaning are independent. But I will not adjudicate between them, because the points I want to make apply whichever of these two criteria you choose.

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[16] In sections 3 and 4, I will commit myself a little more about *that in virtue of which a certain sentence has the meaning it does*—what (Speaks 2021) calls a foundational theory of meaning. But I will remain neutral about *what it is for a certain sentence to have this or that meaning*—what (Speaks 2021) calls a semantic theory of meaning.

[17] As far as I am aware, little has been written about such a phenomenology, and no systematic classification of the various possible candidates has been offered. I propose the following two candidates as the best candidates I can think of. If readers have alternative candidates that would undermine the conclusions I am drawing later, I would be interested to know them.

[18] I am setting aside here the trivial case of logical inferences that can be drawn from any proposition p (whatever it might mean), such as $p \vee q$, $p \wedge p$, $\neg\neg p$, etc. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for inviting me to make this careful qualification.

The first point I want to make is that whichever criterion of "grasping the meaning" you choose, a famous "solution" to the problem of the Trinity—namely the solution of "Relative Identity"—*decreases* meaningful grasp instead of *increasing* meaningful grasp. And if, as I have argued, the real problem of the Trinity is a problem of "meaninglessness" (or absence of grasp), then a solution that only decreases meaningful grasp can only worsen the problem instead of solving it. This point is significant because the solution of "Relative Identity" is among the most important and perhaps the most promising solutions *when we adopt the approach of the Trinity as a Paradox to be solved*. My point, then, is that the approach of the Trinity as a paradox to be solved not only distracts from the real problem (the problem of meaninglessness) but even leads us to "solutions" that *worsen* the real problem (by decreasing our meaningful grasp).

Here is why I think that the solution of "Relative Identity" only decreases meaningful grasp. (My remarks will be brief and presuppose some knowledge of the theory of relative identity—I don't have the space here to introduce it. For references, see (Van Inwagen 1988, 2015).)

Suppose you adopt the theory according to which "meaningful grasp" requires a certain mental "insight". In that case, van Inwagen himself, the main proponent of the Relative Identity solution, plainly admits that his notion of relative identity (such that the Father is the same god as the Son but *not* the same person as the Son) is "mysterious" in the sense that it conveys no particular insight in us. We have clear insights for the notion of identity that we use everyday—but the everyday notion of identity is absolute identity, not relative identity. As for relative identity, van Inwagen is happy to grant that we have no clear insight of it, as long as he can prove that it is a *logically consistent* notion. After all, van Inwagen is trying to avoid a problem of *contradiction*; all he is looking for is consistency, not insight—and what he (knowingly) gets, is consistency *at the cost* of insight. Therefore, in the sense of meaningful grasp as requiring "insight", it is clear that the solution of Relative Identity only decreases our meaningful grasp of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Suppose now we adopt the theory according to which "meaningful grasp" requires an ability to draw inferences from a sentence. Here again, I think it is clear that the solution of Relative Identity avoids a contradiction only at the cost of decreasing meaningful grasp. As van Inwagen himself puts it, "My attempt to state the doctrine of the Trinity rests on the contention that certain rules of logical inference that are commonly supposed to be valid are not in fact valid." (Van Inwagen 2015, 66). Let me give a short example of such a rule of logical inference. The theory of relative identity asks us to think about our common use of identity claims that mention explicitly a predicate; as for instance: "Constantinople is the same *city* as Istanbul" or "Karol Wojtyla is the same *person* as John Paul II". As far as we normally understand these kinds of constructions, when we have "x is

the same F as y" (for instance "Karol Wojtyla is the same person as John Paul II") and also "x is a G" and "y is a G" ("Karol Wojtyla is a man" and "John Paul II is a man"), we can infer "x is the same G as y" ("Karol Wojtyla is the same man as John Paul II"). In other words, the following rule of logical inference is commonly supposed to be valid:

> *x* is the same *F* as *y*
> *x* is a *G*
> *y* is a *G*
> Therefore: *x* is the same *G* as *y*.

The theory of relative identity consists precisely in rejecting that inference rule (which, again, is a very intuitive inference rule given our common understanding of sentences of the form "*x* is the same *F* as *y*"). Rejecting an inference rule is a very useful move when you're trying to avoid (the derivation of) a contradiction. The extreme version of this kind of strategy would be to reject *all* rules of inference and accept a (big) set of basic propositions (axioms): in such a case, it would be (trivially) impossible to derive any contradiction in your system[19] because nothing *at all* can be derived. But of course, in terms of meaningful grasp, your language would stop having any grasped meaning for you (at least in the sense of meaningful grasp as ability to draw inferences). Of course, the strategy of Relative Identity is not as radical as that: many inference rules remain valid for relative identity. But the *gist* of the solution resides not in the inference rules that it retains but strictly in the ones it *rejects*. In other words, it helps avoiding the contradiction *only inasmuch* it diminishes our meaningful grasp (in the sense of ability to draw inferences).[20,21]

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[19] As long as none of your axioms is in itself contradictory.

[20] And actually, it can be noted that this strategy diminishes meaningful grasp to a quite radical degree. This is because another rule it rejects is "Leibniz's Law", namely:

> x is the same F as y
> x is a G
> Therefore: y is a G.

And one might argue that Leibniz's Law is a *constitutive* rule of the very meaning (or at least of our grasped meaning) of an "identity" relation. If you reject Leibniz's Law, it is not clear at all in what sense of "identity" the relation you get is still an "identity" relation, and not just a mundane equivalence relation, like "being of the same height" or "being parallel" (for this objection, see Wiggins 2001, 27, objection (i)).

[21] An objection from an anonymous reviewer made me aware that the notion of rules of inference I need, in order to say that rejecting rules of inference diminishes meaningful grasp, is in fact the notion found in *Relevance Logic*. This is because, if we use classical logic, the principle according to which "the more inferences you can draw from S, the more meaningful grasp you have of S" would imply that we have maximal meaningful grasp of logical contradictions (from which anything follows in classical logic). In relevance logic, on the other hand, contradictions

Whatever notion of meaningful grasp one adopts, it seems then that the solution of Relative Identity avoids a paradox only at the cost of diminishing meaningful grasp. If I am right that the real problem of the Trinity is not a problem of Paradox but a problem of Meaninglessness, it follows that this "solution" can only worsen the real problem of the Trinity.

What we will be looking for in the remainder of this paper is a strategy to *increase* our grasp of the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity. How can that be done? How can we increase our grasp of the meaning of a sentence which is initially unclear.

I can think of two very different methods: the method of *philosophical query*, and the method of *meaning-giving genealogy*.[22] I will present both methods briefly in this section and follow the second method in the next sections.

The **method of philosophical query** relies on the criterion of meaningful grasp as requiring an ability to draw inferences: when you don't know the meaning of a certain string of words, you can get a better grasp by asking a competent authority whether it is legitimate to infer from it certain other sentences (sentences of which you *already grasp* the meaning). For example, imagine a contemporary philosopher who is puzzled by the words "*hypostasis*", "*ousia*" and "*homoousios*" in the creed, and doesn't know what they mean (nor *a fortiori* what sentences containing them mean). He might reason as follows: "I don't know what it means that there is 'one *ousia*' and 'three *hypostaseis*', because I don't know the meaning of these words, but I *know* the meaning of the phrase 'individual substance' as contemporary philosophers mean it; So if anyone could tell me whether these sentences *entail* 'there is one individual substance' or 'there are three individual substances', I would thereby gain a better grasp of what is meant." Who might respond to our philosopher's queries? Perhaps an oracle, perhaps the Bible (by proper inquiry and interpretation), perhaps theologians, or a Magisterium in charge of interpreting the doctrine in contemporary terms. Whoever might be able to respond, it is clear that the response to the philosopher's queries would increase his understanding (i.e. would increase his grasp of the meaning—grasp in the sense of ability to draw inferences).

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are not explosive. Though relevance logic is a non-classical logic, and would be a strong commitment if accepted across the board, it seems to be a very plausible logic *for a theory of meaningful grasp as ability to draw inferences*.

[22] Here again, I feel like there doesn't exist in the present literature other systematic classifications of the possible solutions to this problem. I am offering the best classification I could think of; but maybe some readers will propose other candidates to solve the same problem. It should be noted that what I am looking for are more specifically the possible methods for increasing our grasp *of theological doctrines*. Perhaps there are other methods I didn't think of and that would be relevant for other kinds of sentences, but as long as they cannot be applied to theological problems, they would not be relevant to my project here.

This method is a very good method to increase our meaningful grasp, if at least the oracle (or whatever authority) accepts to answer the query non ambiguously. And, arguably, we could interpret certain declarations of Councils or the Magisterium across history as offering just such answers. After all, the word "*ousia*" was originally a philosophical term of art in antiquity (a term that philosophers of that age understood clearly, or thought they understood clearly), not a Biblical term; so when the Fathers determined that in God, there is just one "*ousia*", they might have been responding to a query raised by philosophers in philosophical terms.

One limit, though, of the method of philosophical query is that it doesn't seem to be able to provide a *full* understanding of the theological or revealed doctrines. Here is why. When you have some theological doctrine *S* that you don't understand, if you ask "does it entail that *p*" and get a response, you will gain *some* bit of understanding of *S*'s meaning, but presumably the possibility (or impossibility) to infer "*p*" will not *exhaust* the meaning of *S*. And even if you go on with other queries ("does it entail *q*? and *r*? and *s*?"), you will get an ever better approximation of the meaning of *S*, but you will never be assured to have reached its *full* meaning.

This is why the second method seems to me to be more satisfying.

The **method of meaning-giving genealogy** relies on the criterion of meaningful grasp as requiring an insight. The initial idea is that the meaning of a word (or a sentence) doesn't fall from heaven, but is given to the word by what might be call its historical "baptism", and that this historical baptism already contained some insight, that we can try to trace back.[23] When a word is first introduced, the act by which it is introduced (and the context of that act) provide the word with its meaning. For instance, if you want to know *the* meaning of theological words like "*ousia*", "*hypostasis*" or "trinity", you have to study the process by which (in their initial historical context) they were given a meaning. If you manage to do that, and if you manage to trace back the insight that was possessed by those instituting this meaning, then what you will get is the *full* grasp of the meaning of the word (not an approximation thereof, as in the previous method), because a word couldn't possibly have *more* meaningful insight than it was initially given by its baptism.[24]

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[23] The notion of an initial "baptism", giving a word its meaning, comes of course from (Kripke 1980), and I share with Kripke the view that the history of the initial introduction of a word is essential to determine its meaning. But Kripke adds a specific view about how the baptism of a word determines its meaning—namely an externalist view of the meaning of a name as rigid designator of the entity it was baptized to refer to. My theory about the contribution of the "baptism" is distinct, since I add a mentalist contribution which is absent from Kripke's account.

[24] Granted, the meaning of a word can *change* across time; which means that after a first "baptism", it can be "rebaptized", with a richer meaning (requiring a richer insight) or a completely different meaning (requiring a completely different insight). I doubt that this is the

This is the method I am going to apply to the problem of the Trinity. But before that, in order to flesh out more clearly what the method is, I will show another example of application.

3. The Method of Meaning-giving Genealogy: An Example

I will take as an example the meaning of the words "type" and "token" in their technical, philosophical sense (see Wetzel 2018).

When philosophy teachers introduce this distinction to students, they usually start with an appeal to intuitions of the following sort:

(a) There are (exactly) three letters in the word "daddy".
(b) There are (exactly) five letters in the word "daddy".

The teacher will usually invite his students to reflect on the intuitions that both sentences, on the face of it, express a truth. But of course, the two sentences, as they are formulated, are contradictory (or at least mathematically incompatible). How can that be? The teacher will immediately go on to "solve" the paradox by saying that the two sentences are true in two different senses of "letters": (a) is true by referring to letter-types, while (b) is true by referring to letter-tokens.

I invite the reader to hold on one second *before* the teacher gives the "solution" to the "paradox". Let's reflect on the stage at which we are just considering (a), (b), and their apparent incompatibility. What is clear at this stage, is that the apparent contradiction between (a) and (b) doesn't diminish at all, in our minds, the certainty that each of them expresses a truth (and *a fortiori* the certainty that each of them is a meaningful sentence). What we will normally and rationally think when confronted with (a) and (b) is that their apparent contradiction is *merely apparent*—that the tension between the two intuitions is *merely verbal*, merely due to the limitations of our language. We can *see* that the paradox is merely verbal because if we reflect carefully on the insights we have for (a) and for (b), and if we try to entertain both insights at the same time, it is *obvious* (for anyone who understands these sentences) that the *insights* themselves are *not at all* in tension with each other, let alone in contradiction.

Anderson (2007, 222–24) introduces the notion of a MACRUE: a Merely Apparent Contradiction Resulting from an Unarticulated Equivocation. The apparent contradiction between (a) and (b) falls in this category. But it is more than that: it is a merely apparent contradiction for which it is *obvious*, upon

way the Christian doctrine evolves, but in any case, if that were so, what is relevant for the method of meaning-giving genealogy is to trace back the history of the word up to the baptism that gave it *the meaning intended in the relevant doctrine* (that might be the second or third baptism of the word rather than its first one).

reflection, that the contradiction is merely verbal (because we can *see*, directly from our entertaining both *insights* at the same time—or in a "synoptic" way—that *they* are not at all in contradiction with each other).

What should we do then, when we are confronted with an apparent contradiction that is obviously merely verbal? The normal way to deal with this is to introduce a terminological distinction. We will say something like the following:

> (7) (a) is true in the sense of letter-types,
> (8) while (b) is true in the sense of letter-tokens.

But it is important to be clear about what we are doing when we "solve" the verbal contradiction with such a distinction. What we are *not* doing is using a pair of words ("type" and "token"), of which the meaning is clearly grasped beforehand, and that helps us gain a new insight (a new grasp) into the compatibility of (a) and (b). What happens is exactly the opposite: we *already* have a full insight into the compatibility of (a) and (b), and *that* insight is what gives the pair of words their new and technical meaning. Notice here that the grasp we have of the compatibility of both sentences is not only increasing *our grasp* of the words "type" and "token": this grasp is what is used to determine *the (stipulated) meaning itself* of the words. This grasp serves for the baptism of meaning of the words themselves. In other words, we reason as follows:

> (9) It is clear that there is a sense in which (a) is true and another sense in which (b) is true (and that these senses are compatible).
> (10) Let us *stipulate* to use the word "type" for *the* sense in which (a) is true.
> (11) Let us *stipulate* to use the word "token" for *the* sense in which (b) is true.

The distinction "type / token" is not really a "solution" to the apparent contradiction, one that would "help seeing" the non-contradiction between (a) and (b). Rather, it is a label posited on the obvious insight that (a) and (b) are not in contradiction.

The series (9–11) provides a meaning-giving genealogy for the words "type" and "token" in their technical philosophical sense. The meaning of this distinction is *given* precisely by the compatible insights between (sentences like) (a) and (b). And that's why philosophy teachers usually use this kind of example when they want to convey into the minds of their students the meaning of this distinction. Philosophy teachers are doing exactly what they should do to increase the meaningful grasp of their students: they reproduce the context that

gave meaning to the words—and in this case, the context of this baptism was the grasping of the clear compatibility of two distinct insights.

Let us be a bit more precise: what are the insights about (a) and (b), about which I say that they are clearly compatible? In the case of (a), the insight that (a) is clearly true probably comes from the experience of being able to count as follows: "in the word 'daddy', there is D (that's one), then A (that's two), and finally Y (that's three)". In the case of (b), the insight will be something like "in the word 'daddy', there is D (one), A (two), D (three), D (four), and Y (five)". In both cases, the insights are associated with the experience of counting (with two different experiences of counting, counting in two different ways the letters of the word "daddy").

To summarize, we can reduce the meaning-giving genealogy of "type" and "token" to the following three elements:

> (12) We have two clearly *compatible insights* of (a) and (b) (as both true)
> (13) We have *paradoxical* (apparently contradictory) *sentences* for expressing these insights
> (14) From (12) and (13), we produce a new verbal distinction, which renders manifest or explicit the compatibility between (a) and (b).

In the next section, I will argue that we have exactly the same structure of meaning-giving genealogy (for "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*") in the Trilemma of the Trinity. I will try to argue that the following three claims are true:

> (15) The *vetula* has three *compatible insights* for (1–2–3) of the Trilemma (as true)
> (16) The verbal formulation of (1–2–3) is clearly in superficial paradox
> (17) From (15) and (16), theologians have produced a distinction (*ousia* and *hypostasis*) that is designed to capture and render manifest the compatibility of (1–2–3).

Before applying this methodology to the case of the Trinity. I would like to make explicit one commitment it has about the theory of meaning. In section 2, I said that my proposed analyses of what it is to "grasp a meaning" remained neutral concerning the various possible theories of what it is to mean so and so. But in this section, I have said that the insight one has —when confronted with the verbally contradictory sentences (a) and (b)—is what gives these sentences their *meaning* itself (not just what gives us a better *grasp* when we reproduce the insight, but what gave the sentences their baptismal *meaning*). So it seems that I am now committing myself to a theory *of meaning* after all (the conventional *meaning* of the words "type", "token", and perhaps "*ousia*", "*hypostasis*") and not

just a theory of "grasping the meaning". This is true in one sense, and not in another. The important distinction here is the distinction made by Jeff Speaks (2021)[25] between "semantic theories of meaning" and "foundational theories of meaning". A semantic theory of meaning is a theory that tells you what meanings are (Are they just truth-conditions? Or functions from contexts to truth-conditions? Is the meaning of a sentence compositionally derivable from the meaning of its components? What are the meanings of isolated words?). A foundational theory of meaning, on the other hand, is a theory about the facts (psychological and/or sociological) in virtue of which a certain sentence has the meaning that it does (Is it in virtue of the intentions of the speaker? Or in virtue of the beliefs of the speaker? Or in virtue of the causal origin of the words?) The meaning-giving genealogy, which I am using here, does seem to resort to a certain *foundational* theory of meaning, more precisely a *mentalist* theory of meaning: the words "type" and "token" (and the sentences in the doctrine of the Trinity) have the meaning they have (at least in part) *in virtue of* the insights that were possessed by the community who baptized these words (and *that's* why we can increase *our* insight by appealing once again to this insight in us).[26] Two qualifications are important here. First, I am not sure whether my project requires an *overall* commitment to the mentalist theory of insight: what is important for this paper is only that *some* words or sentences (those I am talking about) get their conventional meaning *at least in part* from the baptismal insight. But perhaps other words get their meaning otherwise. And perhaps even these words get some other part of their meaning from other (externalist) aspects of their baptism. Second, even if my methodology had a commitment to a mentalist *foundational* theory, this implies no commitment whatsoever about the correct *semantic* theory of meaning—and certainly not a commitment to an internalist semantics. An internalist commitment in semantics would be going strongly against the majority view in contemporary debates; a mentalist commitment in foundational theory doesn't have a similar consensus against it.

4. The Meaning-giving Genealogy of the Trinity

Let us come back now to the problem raised in section 1, namely the "problem of meaninglessness". Do Christian believers have any content in mind when they say they believe in "the doctrine of the Trinity"? And what is the meaning of this word in the first place?

[25] Speaks follows here David Lewis, see the first section of (Speaks 2021).

[26] The mentalist foundational theory that comes closest to what I am defending here is not the famous Gricean theory, in which words get their meaning from the agent's *communicative intentions* (see Speaks, 2021, sect. 3.1.1). It is rather the theory that gives the meaning-giving role to *beliefs*, which was suggested by Lewis (see Speaks, 2021, sect. 3.1.2).

A reasonably educated Christian will normally be able to produce at least the following response: "the doctrine of the Trinity says that, in God, there are three persons but one substance". But, as noted before, that will not help much because "person" (Greek: *hypostasis*) and "substance" (Greek: *ousia*) are themselves technical theological words. So the next question is: what do these words mean? And if we follow the method of meaning-giving genealogy, the question becomes: how and in which context did these words acquire their initial meaning.

What I am proposing here is that the words "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*" were first introduced as a technical distinction designed to render manifest the non-contradiction of some more fundamental insights—namely the fundamental insights of the Trilemma.

(1) a. Jesus is God.
b. The Father is God.
c. The Holy Spirit is God
(2) Jesus is not the Father, and Jesus is not the Holy Spirit and the Father is not the Spirit.
(3) There is only one God.

(1) and (2) seem to entail that there are three "something", namely: Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit. But (3) clearly states that there is one "something". Hence the apparent contradiction.

Given this apparent contradiction, "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*" can be interpreted as the *label* that theologians posited on these intuitions in order to render verbally manifest the fact that they are in fact fully compatible. (Just like the truth of "there are three letters in "daddy"" is *clearly* compatible with the truth of "there are five letters in "daddy"".) In this hypothesis, the Trilemma would be the context in which the meaning of "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*" was stipulated, according to the following stipulations:

(18) *ousia* $=_{df}$ the sense in which (3) is true (*ousia* will be our stipulated word for the "something" of which our insight tells us that there is just one)
(19) *hypostasis* $=_{df}$ the sense in which (1) and (2) are true (*hypostasis* will be our stipulated word for the "something" of which our insight tells us that there are three: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit).

(Compare these two definitions with the definitions (10) and (11) for "type" and "token" in the previous section.)

But that is not sufficient: it is OK to give meaning to "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*" *via* the insights of (1–2–3) *only if* (1–2–3) do have a grasped meaning. And as we saw in section 1, there can be reasonable doubt as to whether (1–2–3) give rise to

any grasped meaning at all (or at least, any grasped meaning that renders them compatible). The next question we need to answer, therefore, is: what allows us to grasp a meaning for sentences (1–2–3) in the first place?

Compare again with the case of the sentences (a) and (b) in the previous section: what gave these sentences their meaning was a certain experience of counting (counting "D, A, Y", or counting "D, A, D, D, Y"), which provided the appropriate insights (and also, presumably, the appropriate ability to draw inferences).

In the case of the Trinity, we need to determine *what* the experiences are that provide the appropriate insights into the meaning of the following sentences:

(1) a. Jesus is God.
b. The Father is God.
(2) Jesus is not the Father
(3) There is only one God.[27]

My hypothesis about the experiences that give these sentences their meaning is as follows:

(20) What gives (1a) its meaning is the experience of the Lordship of Jesus (ELJ).[28]
(21) What gives (1b) its meaning is the experience of the Fatherhood of God (EFG).[29]
(22) What gives (2) its meaning is the experience of the Sonship of Jesus Christ (ESJ).[30]
(23) What gives (3) its meaning is the experience of the falsity of polytheism (EFP).

These four experiences, I would argue, are experiences that the uneducated but faithful *vetula* can have. Whether or not she has any idea of what theologians mean by "*ousia*" or "*hypostasis*", she has a clear insight of what she means when she utters (1a), (1b), (2) and (3) because these insights come from the corresponding spiritual experiences.

What kind of experiences are these? Are they just intuitions akin to the intuitions students have about the number of letters in the word "daddy"? Are

[27] For simplicity, I ignore again the case of the Holy Spirit, but what I say about the two other persons should be enough for the reader to guess the kind of things I would say about the Holy Spirit.

[28] See (Emery 2012, 35-36, point 5 "Jesus is the object of worship").

[29] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §239, and (Emery 2012, 22-23, 112-120).

[30] See (Emery 2012, 34-35, point 4 "Jesus is the Son of God", and 125-128).

they religious experiences of a sort not reducible to ordinary intuitions?[31] I think we should distinguish here between the first three (20–22) on the one hand, and the fourth one on the other hand. The experience EFP is a pure intellectual intuition that can be grasped and that can seem true by the natural use of reason alone. Concerning the first three experiences, it seems that they are properly religious, and even properly christological: ELJ and ESJ are directly experiences about the person Jesus-Christ, and even the experience of the Fatherhood of God is an experience that comes from the encounter with Jesus-Christ, as the proper sense of "fatherhood" in EFG goes beyond a mere metaphorical meaning standing for "creator of human beings". We wouldn't know that God is father in the important, Christian, sense, if we hadn't understood in which sense he is the father *of Jesus-Christ* teaching us the "Our Father".[32] Let's focus, then, on the directly christological experiences of the Lordship of Jesus and the Sonship of Jesus. A biblical expression of the former could be Thomas' exclamation "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28). As for the latter, we could think of Peter's response "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). These experiences have (at least) two phenomenological elements for the believer: first the believer (Thomas or Peter, or the *vetula*) has the phenomenology of grasping a certain meaning; second, the believer has the phenomenology that this meaning seems true. Notice that by "first" and "second", I don't want to suggest that there is a chronological succession here, nor a logical priority of the phenomenology of meaning-grasp over the phenomenology of truth-seeming. In many cases, for example if I tell you that "there exist extra-terrestrials", you can have the phenomenology of grasping the meaning of what I just said *before* (both logically and perhaps chronologically) you come to get a phenomenology of this meaning seeming true or seeming false to you. But in the case of the experiences ELJ and ESJ, it seems to me theologically more plausible that Peter and Thomas get both phenomenological elements (the grasp of the meaning and the truth-seeming) in the same overall experience. Is it *possible* for someone else to grasp the meaning of ELJ or ESJ without this meaning seeming true to them? In other words, is it possible for the non-believer to grasp the meaning of ELJ and ESJ? I am not sure about this, and I'm not prepared to defend that it is absolutely impossible.[33] So there are two ways in which the experiences ELJ and ESJ are not (or perhaps not) "extraordinary". First, they are ordinary in their having both a phenomenology of meaning-grap and a phenomenology of truth-seeming (the student's experiences about the number of letters in "daddy" also have these two elements); and second, they are *perhaps* ordinary in the *possibility* to have the

[31] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

[32] See again (Emery 2012, 22-23).

[33] I'll come back in conclusion to this point, and to its consequences on a possible apologetical project.

phenomenology of meaning-grasp without the phenomenology of truth-seeming. But there are two ways in which these experiences are (or are perhaps) extraordinary or specifically religious. First, it *might be* that these experiences (as overall experiences) include some further phenomenology, in addition to the phenomenologies of meaning-grasp and truth-seeming, further phenomenology that would be specifically religious and/or supernatural. (For instance, it seems possible that Thomas' and Peter's overall experiences include a phenomenology of *love of Jesus*, in the supernatural sense of love of *caritas*; and it might be that this is a properly mystical or supernatural phenomenology—accessible to the *vetula*). Second, the phenomenology of truth-seeming for the contents "Jesus is Lord" and "Jesus is the Son of God" is very probably supernatural in its causal origin; this is at least what seems to be suggested by Jesus' response to Peter after his confession: "this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by My Father in heaven" (Mt 16:17). Therefore, even if it were possible for non-believers to have the phenomenology of grasping the meanings of ELJ and ESJ, it seems traditional to affirm that the phenomenology of truth-seeming for these contents cannot be had without the supernatural grace of Faith.

It is important to notice here that the meaning-giving genealogy I am offering has a two-stage structure:

> The words "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*"
> get their meaning from
> the propositions in the Trilemma
> which in turn get their meaning from
> spiritual experiences (ELJ), (EFG), (ESJ) and (EFP).

This kind of structure, I want to argue, is *internal* to Revelation. What I mean is this: revealed dogmas do not come as a mere list of propositions, but as a structured whole in which some (later) declarations receive their meaning from (earlier) data. Because of this internal structure, it is not a proper methodology for Christian philosophers to just take the list of conciliar pronouncements and, starting from there, to try and make sense of these pronouncements in a consistent way. The conciliar definitions (e.g. "one substance in three persons") have to be taken as structurally dependent on some ancient data that give *meaning* to them. Taking conciliar or dogmatic definitions as basic and independent data presents a big risk of missing their very meaning.

What I am defending here is not just the modest and obvious claim that knowing a bit about the history of dogmas can be illuminating when we are talking about the Trinity (or other themes of philosophical theology). Rather, I am defending the following, more radical, claim: that the history of dogmas is *constitutive* of their very meaning—constitutive in the sense that it is not possible

to convey in an interlocutor the *same* (grasped) meaning without reproducing in her the conditions of insight of its historical baptism[34]; and therefore that doing historical theology is the core of the task in solving « the » problem of the Trinity (namely, the problem of meaninglessness).[35]

5. The Mysterianist Solution to the Problem of the Trinity

Now that I have proposed a theory of the meaning of "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*" and a theory of the meaning of the propositions in the Trilemma, let us see how this helps us deal with "the problem of the Trinity".

In section 1, I argued that the real problem of the Trinity was not to "solve" an apparent contradiction between clearly understood meanings, but rather to grasp a meaning in the first place for the doctrine of the Trinity. I said that I was rather pessimistic about the *vetula* having a full awareness of the meaning of such phrases as "*ousia*" or "*hypostasis*", but that we should rest content if we could find out that she believes in the appropriate *propositions* even if she is not aware that these propositions are those that are meant by the technical terminology of the doctrine (this would be having what I called "meaningful belief by accident" in the doctrine of the Trinity).

Given what we have just seen in section 4, I think we can conclude that the *vetula* may very well have "meaningful belief" (be it by accident) in the doctrine of the Trinity. If the *vetula* has the experiences that I described (Lordship of Jesus, Fatherhood of God, Sonship of Jesus and Falsity of polytheism), then she has all the insights that she needs in order to give meaningful assent to propositions (1–2–3) of the Trilemma. She could also be brought to reflect on this set of propositions, to which she assents, and given the insights she has for all sentences, she would be in a position to recognize that these insights are not incompatible or in contradiction (even though the verbal formulation of these insights might be superficially in tension). In other words, she would be in just the same position as the student who first becomes aware of the truth of both sentences "there are three letters in Daddy" and "there are five letters in Daddy". Becoming aware of the superficial, or merely verbal, paradox, would be in no way a reason to abandon any of these beliefs (neither for the student, nor for the *vetula*).

Now, if we accept the view that the propositions of the Trilemma (together with the corresponding experiences) were the basic data of the doctrine, and that the theological concepts of "*ousia*" and "*hypostasis*" were just a technical

[34] Not necessarily "constitutive" in the sense that the history of the word is part of the essence of the meaning itself—which would require a semantic theory of what meanings are; and, once again, I am not offering this kind of semantic theory here.

[35] For a more expanded defense of the fundamental importance of history for doing an analytic study of dogmas, see (Branson 2014, sect. 3.3).

machinery destined to give a label to the compatibility of the propositions in the trilemma (just like "type" and "token" are labels for the compatibility of (a) and (b)), then we can also say that the *vetula* who has these insights has all it takes to really believe in the doctrine of the Trinity—and that would be true even if, by accident, she had never heard the words "Trinity", "*ousia*" or "*hypostasis*" (as was the case of the Christians of the first century, for instance). She would still have meaningful belief in the basic *data* that constitute the core of the doctrine.

For that reason, the "problem of meaninglessness" (which, I argued, is the *real* problem of the Trinity) can be solved for the *vetula*, by her having the appropriate spiritual experiences. Notice that the solution I put forward is *not* a "solution to the paradox" presented in the Trilemma—not at least if you mean by "solution to the paradox" a model or a method to *show* that the propositions in the Trilemma are in fact not in contradiction. Of course I maintain that the propositions in the Trilemma are not in contradiction, but I don't think there is any need to do anything to try and *prove* it, just like there is no need to do anything to prove that there is no contradiction between (a) and (b) concerning the number of letters in the word "daddy". The *vetula* just *sees* the appropriate insights, and because she can see their truth, she can see that they are not incompatible. Later on, some technical labels are added on top of the conviction that the propositions are compatible but these labels *presuppose* the seen compatibility, they do not "help seeing" the compatibility (just like "type" and "token" do not "help seeing" that (a) and (b) are compatible).

So the problem of the Trinity can be solved, but it is not solved by doing anything to "prove" the compatibility of the propositions in the Trilemma—this compatibility is sufficiently established to the *vetula*'s satisfaction by the insights she has into the truth of the propositions of the Trilemma. For that reason, the solution I propose here can be called "Mysterianist", in the sense that I don't think anything needs to be done to help seeing the compatibility of (1–2–3) of the Trilemma to the non believers' satisfaction. The believers, who have the appropriate spiritual experiences, can just see that these sentences are compatible. Whether they can transmit this insight to others is a secondary issue.

One problem needs to be addressed more carefully. I said earlier that the *vetula* sees the compatibility of the propositions (1–2–3) because she has the corresponding insights. But one should distinguish here between "having the four insights, one after the other and independently" and "having a synoptic insight of all four insights together, seen as compatible". All I have argued for in the previous section is that the *vetula* had the four independent insights. But doesn't she need also the "synoptic insight" (in which all four insights are united as compatible) in order to be justified in believing that the doctrine is coherent?

My response is that the *vetula* can be justified in believing that (1–2–3) are compatible *even if* she cannot get a synoptic insight, gathering all four insights.

For comparison, imagine I receive four papers with four physical truths that Einstein has proved. I cannot process the meaning of any of these truths, but I am justified in believing that these propositions are truths because of the epistemic authority of Einstein and the scientific community. *A fortiori*, I am unable to prove or appreciate the *compatibility* of these four truths, but because for each of them I have a strong reason to believe it true, and because incompatible propositions cannot be true together, I thereby have a reason to think that these propositions are compatible. The *vetula* is in a similar situation: for every proposition in the trilemma, she has an excellent justification to believe it true (based on the corresponding spiritual experience, or insight). That in itself is a reason to think that they are compatible, even if she doesn't have the ability to produce a synoptic insight.

The situation of the *vetula* here would be the same as that famously described by Bossuet about another traditional problem of philosophical theology, namely the problem of free will and foreknowledge. Bossuet considers that we can meaningfully appreciate the truth of free will, and also the truth of divine foreknowledge, even though we are somehow unable to compute a synoptic insight showing us how these two truths fit together. Is that a reason to doubt the compatibility of the two claims? No, according to Bossuet, because:

> The first rule of Logic is: never to forsake truths once known, whatever difficulty occurs in reconciling them; on the contrary, you must resolve to hold fast both ends of the chain, though you do not always see the intermediate links by which the chain is continued. (Bossuet 2006, chap. 4)

Therefore, the solution I am defending here for the problem of the Trinity is also "mysterianist" in a second sense (which we might call Bossuet's sense). As we've seen, it is mysterianist first in the sense that I don't propose to offer any help in "seeing" the non-contradiction of the propositions of the Trilemma for those who lack the appropriate spiritual experiences; but it is also mysterianist in the sense that even the *vetula* (nor anyone else for that matter) doesn't need to be able to *see* the compatibility of the propositions in the Trilemma (where "seeing the compatibility" involves "having a synoptic insight" in which all four insights are united). She only needs to "hold fast the ends of the chain", i.e. hold fast to the propositions independently seen as true, and *deduce* that they are compatible (since true).

If she does that, then she would have a truly meaningful belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, and also an epistemically *justified* belief in the doctrine (or at least a justification not undermined by the "apparent contradiction").

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will remind the main theses I have defended concerning the proper solution to the problem of the Trinity.

To summarize, I have defended the following theses:

> Thesis 1: the real problem of the Trinity is not a problem of apparent contradiction (between well understood meanings) but a problem of meaninglessness (a problem to grasp any meaning at all for the doctrine).
>
> Thesis 2: in order to convey a meaningful grasp of the doctrine, the best method is to trace back the meaning-giving genealogy of the words involved in the doctrine of the Trinity.
>
> Thesis 3: purely verbal paradoxes (of the kind of the doctrine of the Trinity) rely on independent meaning-giving insights the verbal expression of which seems to be contradictory, even though the insights themselves are not contradictory (example: "there are three / five letters in the word 'daddy'").
>
> Thesis 4: as long as one sees the compatibility of the meaning-giving insights, one doesn't need to be in a position to « prove » that the propositions in the verbal paradox are compatible.
>
> Thesis 5: the meaning-giving genealogy of the doctrine of the Trinity traces it back to a couple of fundamental religious experiences that the *vetula* can have.
>
> Thesis 6: therefore, the *vetula* can have a meaningful belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, which solves the problem of meaninglessness (without there being any need to "solve" the problem of contradiction by "proving" that the propositions in the doctrine are compatible).

This solution to the problem of the Trinity is Mysterianist for two different reasons:

> - first, because it states that there is no need to prove the compatibility of the main tenets of the doctrine (as long as each of them is seen as true by a corresponding insight or experience). Therefore, the compatibility of the tenets of the doctrine will remain mysterious (because meaningless) for

those (in particular non believers) who lack the corresponding insights or experiences.
- second, because it states that the *vetula* (or even all theologians) may lack an insight into how the various tenets of the doctrine hang together (they may not see, as Bossuet puts it, "the intermediate links by which the chain is continued"), which means that the doctrine *as a whole* may remain "mysterious" even for believers (as long as the main tenets are, taken one by one, seen to be true).

I will close with a remark concerning the non-believer (i.e. external apologetics). Is it really satisfying for external apologetics to conclude that the doctrine of the Trinity (the compatibility of its main tenets) will remain utterly mysterious (because meaningless) for him? (In the same sense in which colour-words will remain meaningless for blind people.) Would that not be a reason for him to reject Christianity (hence a real problem of external apologetics)? And can't we do better?

First, I'm not sure whether or not we can do better. Doing better, according to the view I have defended here, would be to help the non-believer have the core insights that define the doctrine of the Trinity. And *perhaps* is it possible for a non-believer to imagine what it's like to experience the Fatherhood of God, the Lordship of Jesus, etc. without being himself a Christian.[36] If that is possible, then even a non-believer could entertain the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity, and therefore become convinced that it *does* have meaning. So *perhaps* is it possible to solve the problem of meaninglessness even for a non-believer.

Second and more importantly, even if it were not possible to convey the appropriate insights to a non-believer (that is: without turning him before into a believer), I still don't think that this would constitute an apologetic problem. I mean that this difficulty shouldn't constitute for the non-believer a good reason for not embracing the Christian faith. I am thinking here about an open-minded agnostic, who is pursuing an inquiry about the Christian faith, and stumbles upon this mysterious doctrine. In this doctrine, he sees that the sentences expressing the main tenets are contradictory when interpreted in some straightforward ways he can think about. But his Christian interlocutors insist that these interpretations are incorrect, and that they mean these sentences in a way that is not contradictory, based on their religious experience. He asks if this

[36] *Perhaps* is it possible, for instance, that an (analytically competent) believer should make a metaphysical or logical analysis of her own spiritual experiences, an analysis somehow reducible to elements of experiences accessible to the non-believer, and then transmit this analysis to the non-believer. I am somewhat skeptical about the possibility of such a reductive analysis (and even more skeptical about the probability of its practical success, given our limited capacities for analysis by introspection), but I do not want to rule it out completely.

experience can be transmitted, but unfortunately it cannot (without his becoming a believer). What then, should he believe? Should he believe that these sentences are indeed contradictory? Or that they have no meaning at all? Not if he is initially neutral about the truth of Christianity. If he is initially neutral, he should consider it a live option that his Christian interlocutors do have the experiences they claim to have, and that these experiences provide insights and meanings to the core sentences of the doctrine. It may remain also a live option that the Christian interlocutors *lack* the appropriate meaning-giving experiences. But the issue will be tied with the substantial issue of the truth of Christianity: if Christianity is true, then probably the doctrine of the Trinity will be meaningful and coherent: if Christianity is false, then possibly the doctrine of the Trinity will be meaningless or incoherent. In other words, the open-minded agnostic couldn't see in the meaninglessness (for him) or the (verbal) contradiction of the doctrine of the Trinity an independent *reason* to consider Christianity to be false. And therefore, the "problem of the Trinity" will never be an apologetic *obstacle* in anyone's honest search of religious truth.[37]

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