

UNDERSTANDING THE TRINITY

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In no other subject is error more dangerous, inquiry more difficult, or the discovery of truth more rewarding.

—Augustine, *De Trinitate*

The doctrine of the Trinity poses a deep and difficult problem. On the one hand, it says that there are three distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that each of these Persons “is God”. On the other hand, it says that there is one and only one God. So it appears to involve a contradiction. It seems to say that there is exactly one divine being, and also that there is more than one. How are we to make sense of this?

This is a difficult question, but one that Christians ought to take very seriously. The difficulty isn’t just that the doctrine of the Trinity is mysterious. Rather, it is that the doctrine appears to be logically inconsistent—the sort of thing that couldn’t possibly be true. And yet we must believe it if the rest of our faith is to make sense. For example, the Bible forbids us to worship any being other than God. (e.g., Ex. 20:3-5; Is. 42:8) So Jesus is worthy of our worship only if he is God. But the Bible also makes it clear that the Father deserves our worship (e.g., Mt. 5:9-13; Mt. 7:21; Jn. 2:16), and that Jesus is not the Father (e.g., Mt. 24:36; Lk. 22:42; Jn. 1:14, 18). So, if we are to go on worshipping both Jesus and the Father, we *have* to say that Jesus is God *and* that the Father is God. But, again, we cannot say that Jesus *is* the Father, nor can we say that they are *two Gods*. (Deut. 6:4) Likewise in the case of the Holy Spirit. (e.g., Jn. 14:26; Acts 5: 3-4; Rom 8:26-27)

Theologians and philosophers throughout the ages have devoted a great deal of effort to trying to understand the doctrine of the Trinity. Here we will summarize some of the fruits of their labor. We begin with a brief discussion of the doctrine in historical context, explaining more fully the nature of the problem it raises. We then turn to the most important strategies that have been developed by Christians to resolve this problem.

The Problem of the Trinity in Historical Context

The doctrine of the Trinity says that God exists in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But that’s not all it says. The central elements of the doctrine are neatly summarized in a passage of the Athanasian Creed, one of the most widely respected summaries of the Christian faith:

We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, neither confusing the Persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one person for the Father, another for the Son, and yet another for the Holy Spirit. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one ... Thus, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but there is one God.

This passage offers a paradigm statement of the orthodox understanding of the Trinity. As it makes clear, the doctrine requires not only that God exists in three Persons, but that each of the following is true as well:

- (1) There is exactly one God.
- (2) The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God
- (3) The Father is not the Son, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son.

But these three claims are in obvious tension. The first insists that the doctrine must be interpreted in the context of *monotheism*, the view that there is one and only one God. But the second claim insists that each of the Persons is divine, whereas the third tells us that there are three Persons. Apparently, then, the doctrine says both that there is and there is not exactly one God.

It is important to emphasize that Christians are not at liberty to reject any of claims (1) – (3). For each has been affirmed by the Church to rule out a specific heresy. Claim (1) is intended to rule out *polytheism*, the view that there is more than one God. Claim (2) is intended to rule out *subordinationism*, the view that not all of the Persons are divine, or that the divinity of one or more of the Persons is unequal with, or subordinate to, that of the others. Claim (3) is intended to rule out *modalism*, the view that the Persons of the Trinity are not really distinct from one another but merely different manifestations (in Latin, ‘modes’) in which the one God presents himself. The first heresy is, perhaps, familiar: it’s just the denial of monotheism. The other two require a word of explanation.

There were two opposing tendencies among early Christian monotheists—both of them understandable, but both of them ultimately rejected by the Church as heretical. The first was to emphasize the distinctness of the Persons while neglecting their divinity. The other was to emphasize the divinity of the Persons while neglecting their distinctness. The first tendency (emphasizing distinctness over divinity) is especially associated with a fourth-century Alexandrian named ‘Arius’ who maintained that, like every other son, the second Person of the Trinity is a creature who came into existence at a definite point in time. The second tendency (emphasizing divinity over distinctness) is especially associated with a third-century Roman named ‘Sabellius’. Sabellius maintained that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are just different manifestations of God—just as Superman and Clark Kent are, according to the *Superman* comic books, different manifestations, or disguises, of a single man. Indeed, Sabellius maintained that God just manifests himself as Father in the act of creating, as Son in the act of redeeming, and as Holy Spirit in the act of distributing grace.

Both of these tendencies were condemned at councils of the early Christian Church. Arianism and all other forms of subordinationism were condemned at the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325 A.D., and then again at the council of Constantinople in 381. The Nicene Creed, which was produced by these councils, puts the equality of the Father and Son beyond question, speaking of the Son as “eternally begotten of the Father ... not made”, “true God from true God”, and “of one being with the Father”; and it attributes this same equality to the Holy Spirit. As for modalism—also known as *Sabellianism*—it was

also condemned at the council of Constantinople. The rejection of both heresies becomes even more explicit in the text of the Athanasian Creed.

Christians are committed, therefore, to each of claims (1) – (3) above, and so have no choice but to face the problem of the Trinity head-on. For the same reason, any solution they develop must avoid the heresies just described. But how can this be done?

Strategies for Solving the Problem of the Trinity

The best solutions to the problem of the Trinity all share a common feature: the attempt to identify an *analogy* that helps us to see how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be three *and* one without contradiction. Many Christians will, no doubt, be familiar with a number of the analogies that have made their way into the popular consciousness. Unfortunately, most of these break down at precisely the point where they are supposed to be helpful, suggesting heretical views rather than illuminating the orthodox view.

Among the most popular analogies for the Trinity, two in particular stand out; and most of the others resemble one of them. These two analogies are the “water” analogy and the “egg” analogy. According to the first, just as water takes three forms (liquid, vapor, and ice), so too God takes the form of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. According to the second, just as an egg consists of three things (shell, yolk, and albumen), so God consists of three Persons. The problem with both analogies is that instead of explaining the orthodox view, they actually lead us *away* from it. Liquid, vapor, and ice are three *states* or *manifestations* of a single substance, water; thus to say that the Persons of God are like them is to fall into modalism. On the other hand, shell, yolk, and albumen are three *parts* of an egg; but neither shell, yolk, nor albumen *is* an egg. So this analogy suggests that neither Father, Son, nor Holy Spirit is God—they are merely parts of God. Other popular analogies that are problematic in similar ways are the “man” analogy (God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit just as a man might be a father, son, and husband) and C. S. Lewis’s “cube” analogy (God is three Persons just as a cube is six squares).

Over the past four decades, however, various philosophers and theologians have developed some more promising analogies, or models, for understanding inter-Trinitarian relations. These models are not original; they all have historical roots. But the treatment they are now receiving builds on and, in some important ways extends, the treatment they have received from their historical proponents. The result has been genuine progress with respect to understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. Below, we offer brief sketches of the three most important models. (Fuller treatments can be found in the works listed in the bibliography at the end of this article.) It is important to emphasize that these aren't the only analogies that can be used to make sense of the Trinity. Indeed, there is much controversy about which (if any) is most appropriate. Our favorite is the third—what we call the 'statue-lump' analogy. More than any of the others, we think it succeeds in dispelling the apparent contradiction, if not the mystery, of the Trinity while at the same time avoiding heresy. But all of the analogies discussed below are at least worth exploring, and all have advantages over the more familiar analogies popular in Christian circles.

The Social Analogy: Throughout the gospels, the first two Persons of the Trinity are referred to as 'Father' and 'Son'. This suggests the analogy of a family, or, more generally, a society. Thus, the Persons of the Trinity might be thought of as one in precisely the way that, say, Abraham, Sara, and Isaac are one: just as these three human beings are one family, so too the Persons are one God. But, since there's no contradiction in thinking of a family as three and one, this analogy removes the contradiction in saying that God is three and one.

Those who attempt to understand the Trinity primarily in terms of this analogy are typically called *Social Trinitarians*. Historically, this approach is associated with *Greek (or Eastern) Trinitarianism*, a tradition of reflection that traces its roots to the three great Fathers of the Eastern Church—Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nazianzen, and their friend Gregory of Nyssa. (These three are often referred to as the 'Cappadocian' Fathers, after the province in Asia Minor where they were from.) Prominent contemporary proponents of Social Trinitarianism include Richard Swinburne (Oxford

University, emeritus), Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Calvin Theological Seminary), and William Lane Craig (Talbot School of Theology).

Initially, the social analogy might appear to be no better off than the egg analogy. No member of a family is itself a family; thus, we seem to be faced again with the suggestion that no member of the Trinity is God. But there is an important difference. The members of a family are also full and complete instances of a single nature, humanity. So, unlike the parts of an egg, there are really *two* ways in which the members of a family “are one”. They are *one family*; but they are also “of one nature” or “of one substance”. By analogy, then, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are one in two senses: (a) they are members of the single Godhead, and (b) they each fully possess the divine nature. Thus, when we say there is exactly *one* God, we can take the word ‘God’ to refer to the Godhead, that is, the society of which the Persons are members. But when we say that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, we can take the words ‘is God’ to express the property or characteristic of being divine, which is had by each of the Persons. So, since each of the Persons is both divine and part of the Godhead, we can say truly that each is God, despite the fact that they are distinct.

To some, it might seem that the social analogy still pushes us in the direction of polytheism. We think that there is something to this criticism. But friends of the social analogy rightly respond that defending the criticism requires, among other things, a serious analysis of what exactly it means to be a polytheist—a task that, as it turns out, is far from simple.

Psychological Analogies. Many theologians have looked to features of the human mind or “psyche” to find analogies to help illuminate the doctrine of the Trinity. Hence the label “psychological analogies”. Historically, the use of such analogies is especially associated with *Latin (or Western) Trinitarianism*, a tradition that traces its roots to Augustine, the great Father of the Latin-speaking West. Augustine himself suggested several important analogies. But since each depends for its plausibility on aspects of medieval theology no longer taken for granted (such as the doctrine of divine simplicity), we’ll

pass over them here and focus instead on two analogies in this tradition that have been developed by contemporary philosophers.

Thomas V. Morris (Morris Institute for Human Values) has suggested that we can find an analogy for the Trinity in the psychological condition known as multiple personality disorder: just as a single human being can have multiple personalities, so too a single God can exist in three Persons (though, of course, in the case of God this is a cognitive virtue, not a defect). Others—Trenton Merricks (University of Virginia), for example—have suggested that we can conceive of the Persons on analogy with the separate spheres of consciousness that result from *commissurotomy*. Commissurotomy is a procedure, sometimes used to treat epilepsy, that involves cutting the bundle of nerves (the *corpus callosum*) by which the two hemispheres of the brain communicate. Those who have undergone this procedure typically function normally in daily life; but, under certain kinds of experimental conditions, they display psychological behavior that suggests there are two distinct spheres of consciousness associated with the two hemispheres of their brain. Thus, according to this analogy, just as a single human can, in that way, have two distinct spheres of consciousness, so too a single divine being can exist in three persons, each of which is a distinct sphere of consciousness.

Initially, it might seem that the analogy with multiple personality disorder is no better off than the “water” analogy, and therefore similarly leads us into modalism. After all, the personalities of those who suffer from the disorder might seem to be nothing more than distinct states of a single (albeit divided) consciousness which, like the states of water, can’t be manifested at the same time. Again, the commissurotomy analogy might appear on closer inspection not to be interestingly different from the social analogy. For if there really can be several *distinct* centers of consciousness associated with a single being, then the natural thing to say is that the “single being” in question is either an additional sphere of consciousness composed of the others, or else a “society” whose members are the distinct spheres of consciousness.

It is far from clear that these criticisms are decisive. And, at least on the surface, these two analogies seem to have a great deal of heuristic value; for both seem to present real-life cases in which a single rational being is nonetheless “divided” into multiple personalities or spheres of consciousness.

The Statue-Lump Analogy. The third and final solution to the problem of the Trinity that we want to explore invokes what might be called the ‘relative-sameness’ assumption. This is the assumption that things can be the same *relative to* one kind of thing, but distinct *relative to* another. If this assumption is true, then it is open to us to say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the *same God* but *distinct Persons*. Notice, however, that this is all we need to make sense of the Trinity. If the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same God (and there are no other Gods), then there will be exactly one God; but if they are also distinct Persons (and there are only three of them), then there will be three Persons.

The main challenge for this solution is to show that the relative-sameness assumption is coherent. This challenge has been undertaken by a number of prominent contemporary philosophers, including Sir Peter Geach (Cambridge University) and Peter van Inwagen (University of Notre Dame). Despite the efforts of these philosophers, however, the relative-sameness assumption has remained rather unpopular. The reason appears to be that its defenders have not provided any clear account of what it would mean for things to be the same relative to one kind, but distinct relative to another. In some of our own recent work, we have attempted to address this concern, arguing that reflection on statues and the lumps of matter that constitute them can help us to see how two things can be the *same material object* but otherwise *different entities*. By analogy, such reflection can also help us to see how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be the same God but three different Persons.

Consider Rodin’s famous bronze statue, *The Thinker*. It is a single material object; but it can be truly described both as a statue (which is one kind of thing), and as a lump of bronze (which is another kind of thing). A little reflection, moreover, reveals that the statue is distinct from the lump of bronze. For example, if the statue were melted down, we would no longer have both a lump and a statue: the lump would remain (albeit in a different shape) but Rodin’s *Thinker* would no longer exist. This shows that the

lump is something distinct from the statue, since one thing can exist apart from another *only* if they're distinct. (A statue can't exist apart from itself!)

It might seem strange to think that a statue is distinct from the lump that constitutes it. Wouldn't that imply that there are two material objects in the same place at the same time? Surely we don't want to say that! But then what exactly are we to say about this case? Notice that this isn't just a matter of one thing *appearing* in two different ways, or being *labeled* as both a statue and a lump. Earlier we noted that Superman and Clark Kent can appear differently (Clark Kent wears glasses, for example); but the names 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' are really just different labels for the same man. But our statue analogy isn't like this. Superman can't exist apart from Clark Kent. Where the one goes, the other goes too (at least in disguise). But the lump of bronze in our example apparently *can* exist apart from *The Thinker*. If that's right, then, unlike Superman and Clark Kent, the statue and lump of bronze really are distinct things.

Philosophers have suggested various ways of making sense of this phenomenon. One way of doing so is to say that the statue and the lump are *the same material object* even though they are distinct relative to some other kind. (In ordinary English, we don't have a suitable name for the kind of thing relative to which the statue and the lump are distinct; but Aristotle and Aquinas would have said that the statue and the lump are distinct *form-matter compounds*.) Now, it's hard to accept the idea that two distinct things can be the same material object without some detailed explanation of what it would mean for this to occur. But suppose we add that *all it means* for one thing and another to be "the same material object" is just for them to share all of their matter in common. Such a claim seems plausible; and if it is right, then our problem is solved. The lump of bronze in our example is clearly distinct from *The Thinker*, since it can exist without *The Thinker*; but it also clearly shares all the same matter in common with *The Thinker*, and hence on this view is the same material object.

By analogy, then, suppose we say that all it means for one Person and another to be the same God is for them to do something analogous to sharing all of their matter in common (say, sharing the same divine nature). On this view, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same God but different Persons in just the way a statue and its constitutive lump are the same material object but different form-matter

compounds. Of course, God is not material; so this can *only* be an analogy. But still, it helps to provide an illuminating account of inter-Trinitarian relations, which is all that we are presently asking for.

Conclusion

This concludes our survey of analogical strategies for solving the problem of the Trinity. In our opinion, each of the analogies that we have described—the social, psychological, and material object analogies—represents a fruitful way of thinking about the Trinity. It might be tempting to wonder whether reflecting on the problem of the Trinity in the ways that we have here is of any practical value. Shouldn't we just accept the doctrine as a divine mystery and leave it at that? We believe that the answer to this question is 'no'. As Christ himself tells us, our two greatest commandments as Christians are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. (Matt. 22:37) One way of loving God with your mind is to meditate on the divine nature and to try to understand it, even if you recognize, in all humility, that you will never fully succeed. Indeed, it's hard to see what else could be involved in loving God with your mind, if not trying to understand the difficult things that He has revealed about Himself. Again, one way of loving your non-Christian neighbor is to try as you might to remove stumbling blocks to faith. This, presumably, is part of why Peter urges us to be ready always to defend our faith and to give an account of the hope that is within us. (1 Pet. 3:15) Few problems pose as great a stumbling block to the faith as the problem of the Trinity. To solve it, therefore, both for ourselves and for our neighbor is surely something worth striving for.

None of the analogies we have offered succeeds in completely dissolving the mystery of the Trinity (but none is meant to); and none of them is without certain problems and limitations. Even so, we believe each succeeds in shedding enough light on the mystery of the Trinity to enable us to see that the doctrine is not, as its critics allege, manifestly incoherent.[†]

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NOTES

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