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Trinity

PETER VAN INWAGEN

Trinity

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a central and essential element of Christian theology. The part of the doctrine that is of special concern in the present entry may be stated in these words: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each God; they are distinct from one another; and yet (in the words of the Athanasian Creed), 'they are not three Gods, but there is one God'. This is not to be explained by saying that 'the Father', 'the Son' and 'the Holy Spirit' are three names that are applied to the one God in various circumstances; nor is it to be explained by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are parts or aspects of God (like the leaves of a shamrock or the faces of a cube). In the words of St Augustine:

> Thus there are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and each is God and at the same time all are one God; and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. But the Father is the Father uniquely; the Son is the Son uniquely; and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit uniquely.
>
> (*De doctrina christiana* I, 5, 5)

The doctrine of the Trinity seems on the face of it to be logically incoherent. It seems to imply that identity is not transitive – for the Father is identical with God, the Son is identical with God, and the Father is not identical with the Son. There have been two recent attempts by philosophers to defend the logical coherency of the doctrine. Richard Swinburne has suggested that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be thought of as numerically distinct Gods, and he has argued that, properly understood, this suggestion is consistent with historical orthodoxy. Peter Geach and various others have suggested that a coherent statement of the doctrine is possible on the assumption that identity is 'always relative to a sortal term'. Swinburne's formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is certainly free from logical incoherency, but it is debatable whether it

is consistent with historical orthodoxy. As to 'relative identity' formulations of the doctrine, not all philosophers would agree that the idea that identity is always relative to a sortal term is even intelligible.

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1 The logical problem of the Trinity

The words 'the Trinity' are the English equivalent of the Latin word *Trinitas*, which was coined by the early Christian writer Tertullian. The word, which, etymologically, means something like 'the tripleness', is used to refer collectively to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Tertullian also originated the use of the word 'person' (*persona*) as a common noun that applies to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Outside theology, the Latin word means a mask of the sort worn by characters in a classical drama, and, by extension, a *dramatis persona*, a character in a drama. What Tertullian's application of this word to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit was intended to suggest is disputed.) Theologians writing in Latin have generally said that, although God is a single *substantia*, there are in God three *personae*. Theologians writing in Greek have generally said that, although God is a single *ousia*, there are in God three *hypostases*. These two pairs of terms have caused some confusion, owing to the fact that *substantia* and *hypostasis* have the same literal or etymological meaning: 'that which stands under'.

The purpose of this entry is neither theological nor historical. Its purpose is rather to discuss the philosophical difficulties presented by the 'developed' doctrine (as it is to be found in the Athanasian Creed, of around AD 500). These difficulties are mainly logical. They are well stated in an anonymous seventeenth-century work that has been ascribed to the Socinian John Biddle:

> You may add yet more absurdly, that there are three persons who are *severally and each of them true God*, and yet there is but one God: this is *an Error* in counting or numbering; which, when stood in, is of all others the most brute and inexcusable, and not to discern it is not to be a Man.

> (quoted in Hodgson 1940)

The author of this passage is, essentially, charging that the doctrine of the Trinity implies a violation of the principle of the transitivity of identity, for it implies that the Father is identical with God, God is identical with the Son, and the Father is not identical with the Son. (For a full development of this charge, see Cartwright 1987.) The central problem that faces the doctrine of the Trinity is this: how can the doctrine be stated in a way that is orthodox, clear and does not violate the principle of the transitivity of identity?

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the Christian mysteries, which means that it cannot be seen to be true, or even to be possible, by the use of unaided human reason. This does not mean, however, that human beings, employing only their unaided reason, cannot usefully discuss the question whether the doctrine is formally self-contradictory. (If it could be demonstrated that the doctrine of the Trinity was formally self-contradictory, that would, of course, show that it was impossible; but the converse entailment does not hold.) The task undertaken in this entry does not, therefore, rest on a failure to appreciate the fact that the doctrine is held by those who accept it to be a mystery.

This entry will consider two recent attempts to avoid the conflict with Leibniz's Law that the doctrine of the Trinity seems to face (see Identity of indiscernibles §1). One proceeds by affirming that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are numerically distinct from one another, and attempting to show that this thesis is consistent with historical orthodoxy. The other proceeds by denying the ultimate reality of numerical identity – and thus by denying that Leibniz's Law has anything to apply to. The first risks falling into tritheism, the heresy that there are three Gods. The second risks incoherence if not outright unintelligibility.

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2 Swinburne's theory

Richard Swinburne (1988) has argued for a Trinitarian theology according to which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are numerically distinct from one another and each of them is a God – each is a necessarily existent, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who is the creator of whatever world there may be, and who has each of these attributes essentially. Swinburne's theology, moreover, represents the Father as the creator of the Son. He does not, however, freely choose to create the Son, as he freely chooses to create a physical world. He is, rather, constrained by his own nature – by his perfect goodness – to create the Son (that is, he is constrained to create that very being, as opposed to being constrained to create some being or other who has certain properties that in actuality belong to the Son). 'There being a God and there being no physical world' and 'There being a God and there being a physical world that is "very good"' are morally or ethically indifferent states of affairs, and a God's perfect goodness does not, therefore, constrain him to prefer either to the other: which of these states of affairs obtains is a matter of the exercise of divine free will. But the two states of affairs 'There being only one God' and 'There being more than one God' are not morally or ethically indifferent; the second is better than the first, and the Father is, therefore, constrained by his own perfect goodness to prefer the latter. He therefore creates – eternally, of course: not at some point in time – the Son. Although Swinburne does not explicitly say this, it would appear that the individual essence of the Son must be supposed to include the property 'being created by the Father if any divine being is created by the Father'; if this were not the case, there would be no ontological ground for the fact that the Father creates the Son and not some other divine being. The Son is therefore a necessary being: he exists in all possible worlds, for the Father exists in all possible worlds, and, in every world in which he exists, he is constrained by his essential nature to create the Son. The necessity of the Father and the necessity of the Son may, in consequence, be contrasted by using a pair of phrases that Aquinas used in respect of a different kind of necessity (imperishability): the Father has his necessity of himself, but the Son receives his necessity from another.

The state of affairs 'There being more than one God' is better than the state of affairs 'There being only one God' because it is better that there should be a plurality of Gods who form a community of love than that there should be a solitary God. Swinburne argues, moreover, that it is better for a divine community of love to contain more than two Gods than to contain

only two, for it is good for two beings to cooperate to benefit a third, and such cooperation could not exist within the divine nature if there were only two Gods. Hence, the Father and the Son are constrained by their moral perfection to cooperate to create a third God, the God called the Holy Spirit. There is, however, no good that requires the existence of more than three Gods, and the 'process' of the successive creation of Gods stops at three. (The ontological priority of the Father, Swinburne argues, gives him an authority over the Son and the Spirit, with the consequence that – of necessity – they conform their wills to his in matters about which a solitary God would have a free choice. The wills of the three Gods, therefore, can never be in conflict.)

Can Swinburne plausibly contend that his account of the Trinity is orthodox? There would seem to be two points on which Swinburne might be charged with unorthodoxy. There is, first, the fact that both the Creeds of the Church and every Trinitarian theologian whose writings have not been condemned have insisted that (as the Nicene Creed puts it) the Son is 'begotten, not made' (*genitus, non factus*). And, historical orthodoxy insists, although the word 'begotten' is not used of the Holy Spirit, he too is 'not made'. Second, one might well ask Swinburne why he should not be called a tritheist: after all, he says that there are three Gods, and tritheism is the thesis that there are three Gods. As to the first point, Swinburne contends that in the vocabulary of traditional theology, 'create' (*creare*) and 'make' (*facere*) have been used to express relations that God bears to finite, contingent creatures, and that traditional theologians would have objected to the words '*Pater filium creavit*' only because they would have understood those words to imply that the Son was a finite, contingent being. If, however, the word 'create' is used in the very abstract sense of 'eternally bring about the existence of' – there being no implication that the being whose existence is brought about be contingent or finite – nothing contrary to historical orthodoxy is implied by 'The Father created the Son'. On the second point, the charge of tritheism, Swinburne has chosen his words very carefully:

> A substance is not unnaturally understood as an individual thing which does not have parts capable of independent existence. Now the three persons are such that of logical necessity none can exist without the other…. They are therefore not unnaturally said to form one 'first substance,' and we may follow a natural tradition in calling that substance 'God'.

> (1988: 236)

The sense of this passage seems to be this: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are parts (albeit parts that are not 'capable of independent existence') of a composite being, and it is therefore natural to apply the name 'God' (derived from the general term 'a God', whose extension is the three divine parts of the composite being) to this composite being. If this is a correct interpretation of

this passage, it seems unlikely that St Augustine or the framers of the Athanasian Creed would agree that Swinburne's theory adequately captured the sense in which it is true of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that 'all are one God; and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance' (Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* I, 5, 5).

Whether or not Swinburne's theory of the Trinity can plausibly be identified with the historical doctrine of the Trinity, it is clear that it faces none of the logical difficulties that the historical doctrine seems to face, for there are, according to Swinburne, three metaphysically simple beings to which the general term 'a God' applies, and one composite being to which the name 'God' applies. None of these four beings (of course) is numerically identical with any of the others, and each has – as their non-identity allows – properties that the others lack. Swinburne's purpose was not simply to solve the logical problems that the historical doctrine seems to face, but to provide and argue for the truth of a comprehensive account of the 'internal structure' of the Trinity.

The other recent attempt to solve the logical problems raised by the doctrine of the Trinity is that and no more; the philosophers who have contributed to this attempt have been concerned only to show that the doctrine can be stated without internal logical contradiction, and they have said very little of an ontological nature about the Trinity.

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3 Relative identity

The originator of this approach to the logical problems raised by the doctrine of the Trinity is Peter Geach (1977; Geach and Anscombe 1963), who has developed a theory according to which 'identity is always relative to a sortal term', which he has applied to the problems of counting and predication that confront the doctrine of the Trinity. Geach's work has been continued by Martinich (1978) and van Inwagen (1988). The exposition that follows is a composite of things said by these three authors.

The 'theory of the relativity of identity' proceeds from the axiom that there is no such relation as numerical identity *simpliciter*: there is rather an indefinite number of relations expressed by phrases of the form 'is the same *N* as', where *N* represents the place of a count-noun. There are, for example, such relations as 'is the same horse as' and 'is the same apple as', but there is, strictly speaking, no such relation as 'is the same as *simpliciter*' or 'is numerically identical with'. Identity *simpliciter* (expressed below by '=') is defined by two characteristics: it is *universally reflexive* (everything bears identity *simpliciter* to itself) and it *forces absolute indiscernibility* (this characteristic is embodied in Leibniz's Law or the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals: if $x=y$, then anything whatever that is true of x is also true of y). Relative-identity relations, however, are not in general universally reflexive. (Socrates is not the same horse as Socrates because Socrates is not the same horse as anything; that is to say, Socrates is not a horse.) Relative-identity relations, moreover, cannot be assumed to force absolute indiscernibility – although any given such relation may have this feature. If it were assumed that every relative-identity relation forced absolute indiscernibility, then the logic of relative identities would simply be a fragment of the standard logic of identity *simpliciter*, and anything that could be said by using relative-identity predicates could be said equally well without them. (If every relative-identity relation forced absolute indiscernibility, then '*x* is the same *N* as *y*' could always be replaced by '*x* is an *N* and $x=y$'.)

The logic of relative identities is easily described. Its language is that of first-order predicate logic (without '=' and the description operator, and without singular terms), its two-place predicates being partitioned into two classes (somehow visibly differentiated), the 'ordinary' two-place predicates, and the 'relative-identity' predicates. Its rules of inference are those of ordinary predicate logic, plus two rules that state, in effect, that relative-identity predicates express symmetrical and transitive relations. Relative-identity logic must do without anything

corresponding to Leibniz's Law, for the reason outlined above. It must also do without singular terms. This is because a singular term is supposed to denote exactly one object (if it does not fail of denotation), and the concept of a singular term therefore involves the notion of identity *simpliciter*. (If *a* denotes *x* and also denotes *y*, it follows that $x=y$.) If, however, relative-identity logic is to have any power to represent ordinary, informal reasoning, its users must be able to employ some substitute for singular terms. This can be done through the use of an adaptation of Russell's Theory of Descriptions. For example, 'The present pope is bald' could be read as 'There is an *x* such that [*x* is at present a pope, and, for any *y* (if *y* is at present a pope, then *y* is the same man as *x*), and *x* is bald].' There is, of course, nothing special about the word 'man' that dictated its use in this sentence; we might as well have used 'person' or 'animal' or any of indefinitely many other count-nouns that would apply to anyone who was a pope. The sentence obtained by substituting 'person' in the above sentence is not equivalent in relative-identity logic to that sentence; to deduce either from the other, one would need a premise not endorsed by relative-identity logic. For example: 'For any *x* and for any *y*, if *x* is a man (that is, if *x* is the same man as something) and if *y* is a man, then *x* is the same person as *y* if and only if *x* is the same man as *y*.' No doubt most people would say that this proposition was *true*, but it is of the essence of the theory of the relativity of identities not to regard such propositions as truths of logic.

The customary term for 'what there is one of' in the Trinity is 'substance'. (But Geach and Martinich use 'God' for 'what there is one of' in the Trinity, and van Inwagen uses 'being'.) The customary terms for 'what there are three of' in the Trinity are 'person' and 'hypostasis'. (The relation between the meaning of 'person' in Trinitarian theology and 'person' in ordinary speech is a matter of dispute.)

All of the propositions of Trinitarian theology that raise logical problems can be represented using two relative-identity predicates ('is the same substance as' and 'is the same person as'), a predicate that expresses the divine nature ('is a God' or 'is divine'), and some predicates that express the relations that individuate the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. (The three persons or hypostases have traditionally been held to be individuated by the relations they bear to one another: the Father *begets* the Son; the Holy Spirit *proceeds from* the Father *and* – or *through* – the Son.) For example, the proposition that there are three divine persons can be expressed as 'There exist *x*, *y* and *z*, all of which are divine and are such that none of them is the same person as the others, and such that anything divine is the same person as one of them.' The proposition that there is one God (one divine substance) can be expressed as 'Something is divine and anything divine is the same substance as it.' These two sentences are consistent in relative-identity logic. The proposition that God is omnipotent can be expressed as 'Something is divine and anything divine is the same substance as it and it is

omnipotent.' 'Reference' to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit can be accomplished by a device similar to the one that was used to 'refer' to God in the preceding sentence; in applying this device, use must be made of the predicates that express the relations that individuate the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Van Inwagen has shown (by constructing a model in which the interpretations of these sentences are true and in which 'is the same person as' and 'is the same substance as' express symmetrical and transitive relations) that the formal analogues of the whole set of logically problematic sentences endorsed by the doctrine of the Trinity are consistent in relative-identity logic. One striking consequence of this result is that the formal analogues of the sentences 'The Father is the same person as God', 'God is the same person as the Son' and 'The Father is not the same person as the Son' are consistent – and this despite the fact that 'is the same person as' expresses a transitive relation. (Needless to say, the formal sentences do not have the logical forms suggested by the English sentences they are held to translate.)

The main problem facing this account of the 'logic' of the Trinity would seem to be whether it is intelligible. Is it, in the final analysis, intelligible to suppose, for some x and for some y – where x and y are both substances and both persons – that x is the same substance as y, but not the same person as y? Alleged non-theological cases in which x is the same N as y, but not the same M (the statue is the same lump of clay as the vase, but not the same artefact; Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde were the same man but not the same person; James I of England and James VI of Scotland were the same man but not the same monarch) are all susceptible of lucid and plausible philosophical analyses that do not presuppose that 'identity is always relative to a sortal term'.

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