

Trinity

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The traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity is commonly expressed as the claim that the one God “exists as” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or as the claim that there are three divine persons “in” God, or as the claim that God “exists in three Persons”. In theological contexts, there are two central formulas. The first is that the Father, Son, and Spirit are consubstantial (i.e., the same in substance or essence, Greek: *homoousios*). The second is that the Christian God is three “persons” (Greek: *hypostaseis* or *prosopa*, Latin: *personae*) in one “essence” or “being” (Greek: *ousia*, Latin: *substantia* or *essentia*). Both formulas have been understood in many ways.

After their formulation in the fourth century, the above formulas reigned unchallenged, and were widely assumed as basis for Christian theorizing about God. From the Reformation through the 19th century, the origin, meaning, and justification of the trinitarian doctrine were repeatedly disputed. These debates are discussed in detail in supplementary documents to the present entry. Since the revival of analytic philosophy of religion in the 1960s, many Christian philosophers have pursued philosophical theology, in which central Christian doctrines are given precise (and, it is hoped, defensible) formulations. This article surveys these formulations and the recent scholarly disputes concerning them. The fundamental issue is what is distinctive in the Christian conception of God, as opposed to the gods of other monotheistic religions.

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1. Modalism

Although trinitarianism is by definition supposed to be monotheistic, it may seem to present not one god but three (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) or even four (the preceding three, and also God or the Trinity as a whole). One way around this problem is to take one or more of the aforementioned as being numerically identical to the one God, and say that the others are not further gods, but only “modes” of it—roughly, ways that the one God is. We here use “modalism” as a term for any such view. (In theology “modalism” used as a label for a heretical theory described below, but as used here the term implies neither heresy nor orthodoxy.) While modalism hasn't been explicitly defended in recent analytic philosophical theology, it haunts many recent discussions of the Trinity by philosophers and theologians, and seems important to non-philosophical thinking about the Trinity. Hence, it is here analyzed.

Any kind of modalism must specify what is a mode of what, as well as make clear what a “mode” is. Nor need the modalist declare all the remaining god-candidates to be distinct modes; rather, two or more may be identified with each other.

Carried to an extreme, one may be a modalist without saying that any of the four are modes. This sort of modalist simply identifies God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Though some may hold this view, it is multiply inconsistent with itself, for any Christian will hold that some things are true of each that aren't true of the others (e.g., being tri-personal, being sent by the Father and Son to empower believers, being crucified, being the source of the Son and Spirit). Hence, it can't also be held that the four are numerically one, since nothing can differ from itself.

Since a main motivation of modalist trinitarianism is the preservation of monotheism, God—the god Yahweh of the Hebrew Scriptures—is normally chosen as primary, although one or more the other three may be held to be numerically identical to him. Although other combinations are logically possible, the contours of the New Testament have caused mainly the following forms of modalism to be seriously entertained (we discuss a third, which holds that only the Holy Spirit is a mode, at the end of this section).

- The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are modes of God. (Father-Son-Spirit modalism)
- The Father is identical to God, and the Son and Holy Spirit are modes of God/the Father. (Son-Spirit modalism)

What these modalists hold in common is the conviction that each of the above four terms refers to one and the same entity, either directly, or indirectly, by indicating one of its modes. (e.g., Talk of the Son is talk about God, either because the Son just is God, or because the Son is God living in a certain way.) But, what is a “mode”? It is a “way a thing is”, but that might mean several things. A “mode of *X*” might be

- an intrinsic property of *X* (e.g., a power of *X*, an action of *X*)
- a relation to *X* bears to some thing or things (e.g., *X*'s loving itself, *X*'s being greater than *Y*, *X* appearing wonderful to *Y* and to *Z*)
- a state of affairs which includes *X* (e.g., *X* loving *Y*, it being the case that *X* is great)

The last of these seems to be what is usually meant. (E.g., The Son is the event of God's relating to us as friend and savior. Or the Son is the event of God's taking on flesh and living and dying to reveal the Father to humankind. Or the Son is the eternal event or state of affairs of God's living and relating to himself in a son-like way.) If an event is (in the simplest case) a substance (thing) having a property (or a relation) at a time, then the Son (etc.) will be identified with God's having a certain property, or being in a certain relation, at a time (or timelessly). By a natural slide of thought (or language), the Son (etc.) may just be thought (spoken) of as a certain divine property, rather than God's having of it (e.g., God's wisdom).

Modes may be essential to the thing or not; a mode may be something a thing could exist without, or something which it must always have so long as it exists. (Or on another way to understand the essential/non-essential distinction, a mode may belong to a thing's definition or not.)

There are three ways these modes of a eternal being may be temporally related to one another: maximally overlapping, non-overlapping, or partially overlapping. First, they may be eternally concurrent—such that this being always, or timelessly, simultaneously has all of them. Second, they may be strictly sequential (non-overlapping): first the being has only one, then only another, then only another. Finally, some of the modes may be had at the same times; collectively, they may be partially overlapping.

Mainstream Christian theologians nearly always reject “modalism”, but by this they usually mean a theory like that of Sabellius (fl. 220) who is commonly interpreted as saying that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are sequential, non-essential modes, something like ways God interacts with his creation. Thus, in one epoch, God exists in the mode of Father, during the first century he exists as Son, and then after Christ's resurrection and ascension, he exists as Holy Spirit (Leftow 2004, 327; McGrath 2007, 254–5; Pelikan 1971, 179). Sabellian modalism is usually rejected on the grounds that such modes are strictly sequential, or because they are not intrinsic features of God, or because they are intrinsic but not essential features of God. The first aspect of Sabellian modalism conflicts with episodes in the New Testament where the three are mentioned as acting simultaneously, such as the Baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16–7. The last two are widely held to be objectionable because it is held that a doctrine of the Trinity should tell us about how God really is, not merely about how God appears, or because a trinitarian doctrine should be express (some of) God's essence. Sabellian and other ancient modalists are sometimes called “monarchians” because they upheld the sole monarchy of the Father, or “patripassians” for

their (alleged) acceptance of the view that the Father (and not only the Son) suffered in the life of the man Jesus.

While Sabellian modalism was rejected for the reasons above, it is less clear why other kinds of modalism should be rejected. Suppose one holds that the Three are so many modes of God, i.e., God's eternally having certain intrinsic and essential features. Sometimes the Trinity doctrine is expounded by theologians as meaning just this, the credal formulas being interpreted as asserting that God (non-contingently) acts as Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter, or describing “God as transcendent abyss, God as particular yet unbounded intelligence, and God as the immanent creative energy of being... three distinct ways of being God”, with the named modes being intrinsic and essential to God, and not mere ways that God appears (Ward 2002, 236; cf. Ward 2000, 90).

Such claims, however, may conflict with other things most Christians want to say about God. If God exists necessarily and is essentially the creator and the redeemer of created beings in need of salvation, this implies it is not possible for there to be no creation, or for there to be no fallen creatures; God could not have avoided creating beings in need of redemption. Modalists may get around this by more carefully specifying the properties in question: not *creator* but *creator of anything else there might be*, and not *redeemer* but *redeemer of any creatures in need of salvation there might be and which he should want to save*.

It may be objected that any kind of modalism which makes the Father and/or the Son a mode of God is hard to square with the New Testament, where the Father and Son are represented as enjoying a close, loving personal relationship, and where the Son mediates between God and humankind. These teachings arguably assume the Son to be a person, a self, and not a mere mode of a self. (See [section 3](#) below.) Modalism about the Son seems to reduce this personal relationship to God's “interacting” with himself, or to something like a “friendship” between the multiple personalities of a victim of multiple personality disorder.

One may counter this sort of objection with a metaphysics according to which every person (self), or at least every divine or non-bodily person, is a mode of a non-person. On some theories, all substances or all individuals (or all those other than God) are to be understood as modes. These possibilities, envisioned by 17th century philosophers, have not been carefully applied or adapted to modalist Trinity theories by theologians. A difficulty with moves like this would be that the more a “mode” amounts to, the less the resulting modalism about the Trinity looks like monotheism. For example, if one says that the Son and Holy Spirit are modes of God, but are also personal substances, it looks like God will be a compound entity, with other gods (or divine persons) as parts, which runs strongly counter to the mainstream, pro-Nicene tradition. (See [section 3.3](#) of the supplementary document on the history of trinitarian doctrines.) In sum, “thin” modes saddle a trinitarian modalist with the biblical difficulties noted above, whereas metaphysically “thick” modes seem to run afoul of the doctrine of divine simplicity, or even monotheism.

Most 17th-19th century unitarians, present-day “biblical unitarians”, and some current subordinationists such as the Jehovah's Witness sect hold the Holy Spirit to be a mode of God—God's power, presence, or action in the world. (See the supplementary document on

[unitarianism](#).) Not implying modalism about the Son, this position is harder to refute on New Testament grounds, although mainstream theologians and some subordinationist unitarians reject it as inconsistent with New Testament language from which we should infer that the Holy Spirit is (in some sense) a full-fledged person (Clarke 1738, 147). These groups counter with other biblical language which suggests that the “Spirit of God” or “Holy Spirit” refers to either God himself, a mode of God (e.g., his power), or an effect of a mode of God (e.g., supernatural human abilities such as healing). (See Burnap 1845, 226–52; Lardner 1793, 79–174; Wilson 1846, 325–32.) This exegetical debate is difficult, as all natural languages allow persons to be described in mode-terms (“Hillary is Bill's strength.”) and modes to be described in language which literally applies only to persons. (“God's wisdom told him not to create beer-sap trees.”)

At the popular level, modalist thinking has a firm beachhead; liturgical statements, song lyrics, and sermons frequently use trinitarian names (“Father”, “Son”, “Jesus”, “God”, etc.) as if they were interchangeable, co-referring terms, referring directly or indirectly (via a mode) to one and the same thing.

Among large Christian groups, only the theology of the United Pentecostal Church (a.k.a. “Oneness” Pentecostals), is explicitly modalistic; the Three are either identified with God himself, or with aspects or actions of God.

2. Latin Trinitarianism

“Latin trinitarianism” is a recent label, coined to signify the stream of trinitarian thinking prominent in the Latin-speaking Western church of the late classical and medieval periods. It is most often used by those drawing a contrast between this body of thought, and “social trinitarian” thought. A very rough first approach to the difference between these schools, is: Latin trinitarianism starts with the oneness of God and tries to show how God is three, while social trinitarianism starts with the way in which God is three and tries to show how God is nonetheless one. This recent terminology can mislead though. “Latin trinitarianism” is just what would have been thought of as the creedal teaching about the Three for most of Christian history, or at least a prominent strand of it, another being mysterianism, which is often thought compatible with it. This “Latin” family of theories is here understood as a less prominently mysterian and more metaphysical part of or outgrowth of the pro-Nicene movement. (See [section 4](#) below and [section 3.3](#) of the supplementary document on the history of trinitarian doctrines.)

What Latin theories have in common is their (1) affirmation of the doctrine implied in the Constantinopolitan Creed that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *homoousios* (see supplementary document on the history of trinitarian doctrines [section 3.2](#)), and (2) their denial that this amounts to three numerically distinct things, each of which is divine. That is, they deny that the three are “the same substance” merely in the sense in which three humans are, i.e., each equally instantiates the same universal nature. As they aim to be monotheistic, each variant of this approach has a unique way of undercutting the inference from three divine persons to tritheism.

2.1 Divine Life Stream Theories

We now turn to some recent “Latin” theories. (For historical theories by which these were inspired, see the supplementary document on the history of trinitarian doctrines, [section 3.3.2](#), on Augustine, and [section 4.1](#), on Thomas Aquinas.)

Brian Leftow sets the agenda for his own Latin theory in an attack on “social” theories. (See [section 3](#) below.)

In [Latin trinitarianism], there is just one divine being (or substance), God....[As Thomas Aquinas says,] God begotten receives numerically the same nature God begetting has. To make Aquinas' claim perfectly plain, I introduce a technical term, “trope”. Abel and Cain were both human. So they had the same nature, humanity. Yet each also had his own nature, and Cain's humanity was not identical with Abel's... A trope is an individualized case of an attribute. Their bearers individuate tropes: Cain's humanity is distinct from Abel's just because it is Cain's, not Abel's. With this term in hand, I now restate Aquinas' claim: while Father and Son instance the divine nature (deity), they have but one trope of deity between them, which is God's...bearers individuate tropes. If the Father's deity is God's, this is because the Father *just is* God. (1999, 203–4, original emphasis)

In a later piece, Leftow makes clear that Latin trinitarianism needn't commit to trope theory about properties. Rather, whether or not properties are tropes,

...the Father's having deity = [is numerically or absolutely identical to] the Son's having deity. For both are at bottom just *God's* having deity. (Leftow 2007, 358, original emphasis)

At first glance, these statements seem to simply identify the persons of the Trinity and God; it is the extreme kind of modalism that holds “Father”, “Son”, “Holy Spirit”, and “God” to be four names for one and the same entity. On the other hand, in some places Leftow seems to hold that the three persons are so many modes of God. Well aware of this problem, Leftow tries to clarify his theory, to show why it doesn't amount to any undesirable form of modalism.

In arguing that it isn't obviously impossible for God to be a (Latin) Trinity, Leftow makes an extended analogy with time travel; just as a dancer may repeatedly time travel back to the dance stage, resulting in a whole chorus line of dancers, each of which is a “stage” in the life of that one dancer, so God may eternally live his life in three “streams” or “strands” (Leftow 2004, 312–23). Each person-constituting “strand” of God's life is supposed to (in some sense) count as a “complete” life (although for any one of the three, there's more to God's life than it) (Leftow 2004, 312). Leftow also thinks that just as the many stages of the time-traveling dancer's life are united into stages of her by their being causally connected in the right way, so too, analogously, the lives of each of the three Persons count as being the “strands of” the life of God, because of the mysterious but somehow causal inter-trinitarian relations (the Father generating Son, and the Father and Son spirating the Spirit) (313–4, cf. 321–2).

The Persons simply are God as in certain acts—certain events—in His inner life....none [of these events] are in time....God just eternally *does* the acts which constitute His life; these acts render Him triune. (316, original emphasis)

Leftow argues that his theory isn't any undesirable form of modalism because

Nothing in my account of the Trinity precludes saying that the Persons' distinction is an eternal, necessary, non-successive and intrinsic feature of God's life, one which would be there even if there were no creatures. (Leftow 2004, 327)

While Leftow is trying to develop a positive account of the Trinity, he also wants to show what is wrong with the following argument (2004, 305–6; cf. 2007, 359):

1. the Father = God
2. the Son = God
3. God = God
4. the Father = the Son (from 1–3)
5. the Father generates the Son
6. God generates God (from 1, 2, 5).

His point is that creedal orthodoxy requires 1–3 and 5, yet 1–3 imply the unorthodox 4, and 1, 2 and 5 imply the unorthodox (and necessarily false) statement 6. So what to do? Leftow suggests the above argument misrepresents Christian orthodoxy; *properly understood*, 4 doesn't follow from 1–3, and 6 doesn't really follow from 1, 2 and 5. In Leftow's view, 1–6 above are properly understood as:

1. God, in and only in strand 1 of his life, lives in a Fatherly way.
2. God, in and only in strand 2 of his life, lives in a Son-like manner.
3. (From the standpoint of any one or more strands of his life,) God just is God (is self-identical).
4. Strand 1 of God's life (the Fatherly one) just is (=) strand 2 of God's life (the Son-like one).
5. There's a timeless “generation” relation between strand 1 of God's life, and strand 2 of his life.
6. (From the standpoint of any one or more strands of his life,) God generates God.

(Even if we don't alter 3 or 5, if we simply analyze 1 and 2 as Leftow suggests, the argument is invalid.) We thus “index Trinitarian truths to appropriate sets of events” [i.e., those sets composing God's various life-streams] (2004, 326), thereby showing antitrinitarian arguments to be invalid. Certainly, Leftow is correct in thinking that the argument just quoted is invalid. His justification for reading the problematic argument as above, though, is controversial. He argues that just as with time-bound things, there are “temporary identities”, so with God identity statements must be relativized to something time-like, namely the various “strands” of his life (2004, 323–6; 2007, 370–3). In a later piece, Leftow adapts John Locke's thought experiments about personal identity to support the point that for all we know the “persons” of the Trinity are “event-based persons”, that is, subjects of experience who exist because of certain events or processes in God. Certain “parts of [God's] life... are identical with the lives of the three Persons” (Leftow 2007, 374–5).

Leftow's theory hasn't received substantial criticism in the literature, but possible lines of objection would include that he's trying to illuminate the obscure (the Latin Trinity) by the obscure (the alleged possibility of time travel, and timeless analogues to it). Again, it might be objected that his theory is an objectionable modalism after all, namely the view that the three "persons" are so many intrinsic, entirely-overlapping, eternal, essential modes of the one God, something like God's manners of living. (See [section 1](#) above.) He might reply that it hasn't been shown why a mode of a substance can't also be a substance and a subject of experience.

2.2 Relative Identity Theories

One may think that a trinitarian doctrine inconsistently identifies both the Son and the Father with God, but not with each other. A number of recent Christian philosophers have suggested that the problem isn't with the doctrine, but rather with the absolute concept of [identity](#), or with its application to the trinitarian doctrine. With great precision and creativity, they interpret trinitarian doctrines as involving not identity, but some weaker relation. Following Rea (2003) we divide these into pure and impure relative identity trinitarian theories.

2.2.1 Pure Relative Identity Theories

Peter Geach (1972, 1973, 1980) argues that it is senseless to ask whether or not some *a* and *b* are "the same"; rather, sameness is relative to a sortal concept. Thus, while it is senseless to ask whether or not Paul and Saul are identical, we can ask whether or not Saul and Paul are the same human, same person, same apostle, same animal, etc. The doctrine of the Trinity, then, is construed as the claim that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same *God*, but are not the same *person*. They are "God-identical but Person-distinct" (Rea 2003, 432). The resulting trinitarian theory avoids the inconsistencies mentioned above. Geach's approach to the Trinity is developed by Martinich (1978, 1979) and Cain (1989).

This sort of relative identity trinitarianism, however, depends on the very controversial claim that there's no such relation as (non-sortal-relative, absolute) identity. Most philosophers hold, to the contrary, that the identity relation and its logic are well-understood. One might turn to a weaker relative identity doctrine; outside the context of the Trinity, philosopher Nicholas Griffin (1977; cf. Rea 2003, 435–6) has argued that while there are identity relations, they are not basic, but must be understood in terms of relative identity relations. On either view, relative identity relations are fundamental.

It has been objected to Geach's claim about the senselessness of asking if *a* and *b* are "the same" that,

Given that we have succeeded in picking out something by the use of "*a*" and in picking out something by the use of "*b*" it surely is a complete determinate proposition that $a = b$, that is, it is surely either true or false that the item we have picked out with "*a*" is the item we have picked out with "*b*". (Alston and Bennett 1984, 558)

Rea also objects that relative identity theory presupposes some sort of metaphysical anti-realism, the controversial doctrine that there is no realm of real objects which exists independently of human thought (Rea 2003, 435–6).

Trenton Merricks objects that if a and b “are the same F”, this implies that a is an F, that b is an F, and that a and b are (absolutely, non-relatively) identical. But this is precisely what relative identity trinitarians deny, and this denial leads to the resulting relative-identity trinitarian claims being unintelligible (we have no grasp of what they mean). If someone asserts that Fluffy and Spike are “the same dog” and denies that they're both dogs, and that they're one and the same, we have no idea what this person is asserting. Similarly with the claim that Father and Son are “the same God” but are not identical (Merricks 2006, 301–5, 321; cf. Tuggy 2003, 173–4).

One may also object to either theory being an analysis of the orthodox doctrine, on the grounds that only those conversant in the logic of the last 120 years or so have ever had a concept of relative identity. This may be disputed—Anscombe and Geach (1961, 118) argue that Aquinas should be read along these lines, and Richard Cartwright (1987, 193) claims to find the doctrine in the works of Anselm and in the Eleventh Council of Toledo (675). (See supplementary document on the history of trinitarian doctrines [section 4](#).)

2.2.2 Impure Relative Identity Theories

Peter van Inwagen (1995, 2003) tries to show that there is a set of propositions representing a possibly orthodox interpretation of the “Athanasian” creed which is demonstrably self-consistent, refuting claims that the doctrine is obviously self-contradictory. He formulates a trinitarian doctrine using a concept of relative identity, without employing the concept of identity or presupposing that there is or isn't such a thing (van Inwagen 1995, 241). Specifically, he proves that the following eight claims (understood as involving relative and never absolute identity, the names being read as descriptions) don't imply a contradiction in relative identity logic.

- There is (exactly) one God.
- There are (exactly) three divine Persons.
- There are three divine Persons in one divine Being.
- God is the same being as the Father.
- God is a person.
- God is the same person as the Father.
- God is the same person as the Son.
- The Son is not the same person as the Father.
- God is the same being as the Father. (249, 254)

Van Inwagen neither endorses this trinitarianism, nor presumes to pronounce it orthodox, and he admits that it does little to reduce the mysteriousness of the Trinity.

It may be objected, as to the preceding theory, that van Inwagen's relative identity trinitarianism is unintelligible. Merricks argues that this problem is more acute for van Inwagen than for

Geach, as the former declines to adopt Geach's claim that all assertions of identity, in all domains of discourse, and in everyday life, are sortal-relative (Merricks 2006, 302–4).

Michael Rea (2003) objects that by remaining neutral on the issue of identity, van Inwagen's theory allows that the three persons are (absolutely) non-identical, in which case “it is hard to see what it could possibly mean to say that they are the *same being*...” (Rea 2003, 441) It seems that any things which are non-identical are not the same being. Thus, van Inwagen must assume that there is absolute identity, and deny that this relation holds between, say, Father and Son. Thus, van Inwagen has not demonstrated the consistency of (this version of) trinitarianism, and just as disturbingly, his theory doesn't rule out polytheism, as it doesn't deny that there are non-identical divine beings. In sum, the impure relative identity trinitarian must be able to tell a plausible and orthodox metaphysical story about how non-identical beings may nonetheless be “one God”, and van Inwagen hasn't done this, staying as he has in the realm of logic (Rea 2003, 441–2).

In a later discussion (van Inwagen 2003), van Inwagen goes farther, claiming that trinitarian doctrine is inconsistent “if the standard logic of identity is correct”, and denying there is any “relation that is both universally reflexive [i.e., everything bears the relation to itself] and forces indiscernibility [i.e., things standing in the relation can't differ].” (92) Thus, there's no such relation as classical or absolute identity, but there are instead only various relative identity relations (92–3). Many philosophers would object that whatever reason there is to believe in the Trinity, it is more obvious that there's such a relation as identity, that Leibniz's Law is true, and that we do use singular referring terms.

Rea claims to possess the sort of metaphysical story van Inwagen's theory lacks. Rea and Jeffrey Brower develop a trinitarian theory according to which each of the divine persons is non-identical to the others, as well as to God, but is nonetheless “numerically the same” as all of them (Brower and Rea 2005a). They develop an analogy between the Christian God and material objects. When we look at a bronze statue of Athena, they urge, we should say that we're viewing one material object. Yet, we can distinguish the lump of bronze from the statue. These cannot be identical, as they differ (e.g., the lump could, but the statue couldn't survive being smashed flat). We should say that the lump and statue stand in a relation of “accidental sameness”. This means that they needn't be, but in fact are “numerically the same” without being identical. While they are numerically one physical object, they are two hylomorphic compounds, that is, two compounds of form and matter, sharing their matter. Similarly, they suggest, the persons of the Trinity are constituted by the same stuff (or something analogous to a stuff), albeit an immaterial stuff, which they call “the divine essence”. They, like the lump and statue, are numerically the same without being identical, but they don't stand in a relation of *accidental* sameness, as presumably they could not fail to be related in this way. While they are three different hylomorphic (matter-form) compounds (consisting of that divine essence plus one of: fatherhood, sonship, spirithood), and are three divine persons, they are to be counted as one God. They don't posit “matter” as an additional thing, but only as a sort of ingredient or component of the one God, and of the three persons (Brower and Rea 2005a, 60, 68). This avoids the problem of saying that God is a fourth thing. Brower and Rea argue that their theory stands a better chance of being orthodox than its competitors, and point out that a part of their motivation is that Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas say things which seem to require a concept of numerical

sameness without identity. (See supplementary document on the history of Trinity theories, sections [3.3.2](#), on Augustine, and [4.1](#), on Thomas Aquinas.)

William Lane Craig criticizes the Brower and Rea theory on several grounds (Craig 2005). First, is talk of “immaterial stuff” intelligible at all? Second, is it really orthodox? As we saw above, central parts of the medieval tradition considered God to lack matter, but rather to be form only, or “pure act”. Further, it was maintained that God is simple, without parts or components of any kind, not a thing analyzable into form and (something like?) matter. Third, while Athena and the bronze statue differ in some properties, so long as the latter constitutes the former, they must share others, such as mass, location, and shape. But the persons of the Trinity simultaneously differ in intrinsic properties. And the Son may truly say “I was crucified nearly 2000 years ago”, but the Father may not (Craig 2005, 82–3). Again, the Son is asserted by traditional theology to enjoy a “hypostatic union” with a complete human nature, but the Father does not. If the Son is the same God as the Father, this seems analogous to the apparently contradictory claim that at one time Michelangelo's David statue and the Venus de Milo share all their matter and are one object (Craig 2005, 83). In sum, it is not clear that their approach delivers a consistent theory of the Trinity.

On their theory the term “God” (“Yahweh”, etc.) is ambiguous; in circumstances where no factor singles out one of the three, one who uses a sentence with the term “God” fails to express a proposition. To see this, return to the statue example. Suppose one points at the Athena statue and says “That material object has been around for three thousand years.” Brower and Rea hold that even though there is truly one material object at which you're pointing, the term “That material object” is ambiguous, as it may refer to either the lump of bronze or to the statue. It would matter for the truth or falsity of what you said; suppose the statue is only two thousand years old, while the lump is three thousand. Here the circumstances will likely fix the reference of the term (e.g., one is in a discussion about statues). It is hard to see, though, what would disambiguate certain statements not made in a trinitarian context, for example, “In Yahweh I have found refuge” (Psalm 11:1) or “God created the world.” Does their theory imply that David and Moses failed to assert anything that could be true or false, due to their use of ambiguous terms?

Another line of objection stems from the fact that they only claim to offer a limited analogy of the Trinity—their basic idea is that *there is something somewhat like* a shared matter in the Trinity, which bears *something like* a material constitution relation to each of the persons. In line with the pro-Nicene tradition, while embracing the material constitution analogy as the most accurate, they also give the analogies of three men, a person with multiple personality disorder, and commissurotomy patients who seem to exhibit two “spheres of consciousness”, praising each of these as somewhat “fruitful” and to some degree illuminating (Brower and Rea 2005b). One may view this as either an advantage (from the standpoint of the pro-Nicene tradition) or as a disadvantage (as it doesn't offer a literal metaphysical model).

3. Social Trinitarianism

3.1 20th Century Theologians

Much twentieth century theological literature on the Trinity derives from the influential work of theologians Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Karl Rahner (1904–84), both of whom endorse Trinity theories widely criticized as modalist or close to it. Both suggest jettisoning the traditional term “person” for what God is three of, suggesting the replacements “modes of being” (Barth) or “manners of subsisting” (Rahner). (See Letham 2004, 279; Pugliese 2003, 239.) The second half of the twentieth century saw a backlash against this tendency. In numerous sources, Western or Latin theology was blamed for “overemphasizing the oneness” of God, and balance was sought by looking to Eastern theology, which was credited with either emphasizing or overemphasizing the threeness of God. A number of concerns characterize theologians in this 20th and 21st century movement of social trinitarianism:

- A concern to preserve the interpersonal relationships between the members of the Trinity, particularly the Father and the Son.
- A desire to do justice to the New Testament idea of Christ as a personal mediator between God and humankind.
- Suspicions that the “static” categories of Greek philosophy have in previous trinitarian theology obscured the dynamic and personal nature of God.
- Concern that traditional or Western trinitarian theology has made the doctrine irrelevant to practical concerns such as politics, gender relations, and family life.
- The idea that to be Love itself, or for God to be perfectly loving, God must contain three subjects or persons (or at any rate, more than one). (See [3.2](#) and [3.4](#) below.)

(For surveys of this literature see Kärkkäinen 2007; Olson and Hall 2002, 95–115; Peters 1993, 103–45.) Writers in this genre are unclear about what metaphysics of the Christian God they're endorsing. The views seem to range from tritheism, to the idea that the Trinity is an event, to something that differs only slightly, or only in emphasis, from pro-Nicene (see [section 3.3](#) of the supplementary document on the history of trinitarian doctrines) or Latin theories. Merricks insightfully remarks that some views advertised as “social trinitarianism” make it “sound equivalent to the thesis the Doctrine of the Trinity is true but modalism is false” (Merricks 2006, 306). However, a number of Christian philosophers, and some theologians employing the methods of analytic philosophy, have taken a starting point in this literature and developed clear, full-blown Trinity theories, which are surveyed here. We follow a four-fold classification which sorts them by how they claim to secure monotheism (Leftow 1999).

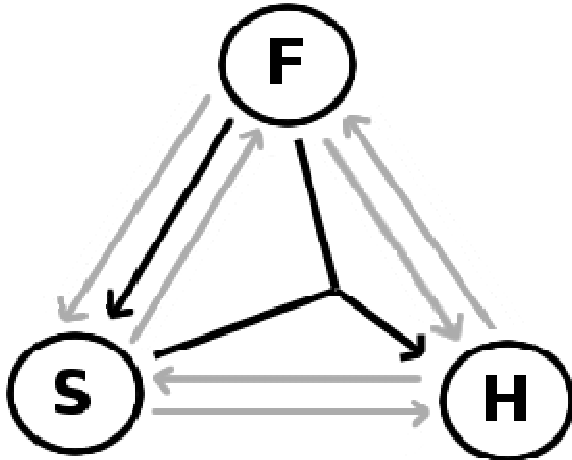
3.2 Functional Monotheist Social Trinitarianism

A social trinitarian may argue that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God because of how they function—how they related to each other, and to everything else. The best developed theory like this is by Richard Swinburne, who argues that it is uncharitable to read the ecumenical councils' claim that “there is only one god” as asserting that there's only one divine individual, as that would contradict their commitment to there being three divine individuals. He suggests that they should be read as “denying that there were three *independent* divine beings, any one of which could exist without the other; or which could act independently of each other” (Swinburne 1994, 180). He holds that each of the three “is God” in the sense that each possesses all the divine attributes. He summarizes his trinitarian theory as follows.

...the three divine individuals taken together would form a collective source of the being of all other things; the members would be totally mutually dependent and necessarily jointly behind each other's acts. This collective [i.e., the Christian God] would be indivisible in its being for logical reasons—that is, the kind of being that it would be is such that each of its members is necessarily everlasting, and would not have existed unless it had brought about or been brought about by the others. The collective would also be indivisible in its causal action in the sense that each would back totally the causal action of the others. The collective would be causeless and so (in my sense), unlike its members, ontologically necessary, not dependent for its existence on anything outside itself. It is they, however, rather than it, who, to speak strictly, would have the divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.... Similarly this very strong unity of the collective would make it, as well as its individual members, an appropriate object of worship. (1994, 180–1)

As he understands the concept of substance, the Trinity, referred to above as “the collective”, is a substance, one with divine substances as parts, but is not itself a divine substance or person. He hastens to add, though, that by a natural extension of use we may say of the Trinity what we say of the persons, e.g., that it is all-powerful, all-knowing, etc. (9–13, 181).

For Swinburne an “ontologically necessary” substance is one which exists everlastingly with no active or permissive cause for its existence. A “metaphysically necessary” substance is one which is either ontologically necessary or such that it everlastingly exists, and at least the start of its existence is due to the inevitable action of some other being which is uncaused and everlasting (118, 146). He rejects the view, popular among theists, that a divine being must be *a se* (i.e., must exist through or because of itself) in the sense of ontological necessity, arguing that it is simpler and more reasonable to attribute only metaphysical necessity to them (118–21, 170–80). In his view, each of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is metaphysically necessary, as the Father is the active cause of the Son, and the Father and Son together actively co-cause the Spirit. (He remains neutral about whether this active causation is eternal or only for the first portion of the Son's and of the Spirit's existence, and he seems not to regard co-causing as involving causal overdetermination.) Each of the three, being omnipotent, must also be a permissive cause of the existence of each of the other two. The following chart illustrates how the persons of the Trinity are related to one another in Swinburne's theory. The black arrows represent active causation, and the gray arrows represent permissive causation.



The Father has a kind of priority, and this gives him authority to lay down some rules which when agreed to will prevent the wills of these three omnipotent beings from ever clashing (171–5). In sum, the Trinity is a tightly unified complex thing with three divine beings as parts, which necessarily acts much as a single personal being would. It is a whole, which is, in a sense, reducible to the sum of its parts; the entire set of truths about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could in principle be stated without mentioning this collective or composite which is the Trinity (10, 13).

Swinburne believes it can be shown probable that a god exists, and he also argues that “the most probable kind of God is such that inevitably he becomes tripersonal” (1994, 191). More precisely, he argues that if it is possible for there to be more than one divine person, there will of necessity be exactly three. A divine person, he argues, being all-knowing and perfectly good, will recognize the supreme value of love.

Love involves sharing, giving to the other what of one's own is good for him and receiving from the other what of his is good for one; and love involves co-operating with another to benefit third parties. (177)

Inevitably, then, the first divine being will produce another, then inevitably cooperate with that being to produce a third, and also inevitably, each of the three will freely allow the other two to continue to exist (being divine and thus omnipotent and perfectly free, each must freely give his permission if anything else is to exist). Thereafter, inevitably, each being will cooperate in whatever either of the others does. Why not a fourth? No qualitative difference in the loving would result therefrom, or at least not a difference that would bring about a over-riding reason for anyone to create a fourth, and so no divine being would, by its essential nature, inevitably bring about a fourth (etc.). And a divine being can't be created by an act of will (rather than an act of essence), as this would imply that it could possibly not exist, which is incompatible with its being divine (177–9).

In a sympathetic but penetrating critique, William Alston highlights some difficulties for the above theory stemming from Swinburne's ideas of metaphysical and ontological necessity. First,

Alston says, “I can find no reason, or even motivation, for Swinburne's making ontological necessity one of the ways of being metaphysically necessary” (Alston 1997, 41). One might even say that the theory is arbitrarily rigged so that may *say* of both the Trinity and each of the persons, that they are all “necessary”. Alston worries that this in fact represents “a considerable weakening of the unity of the divine nature”, as it has been bought cheaply with a disjunctive definition (53). Second, while Swinburne wants to say that an ontologically necessary being and a (merely) metaphysically necessary being are “equally ultimate”, it seems that the former would be more ultimate. And while both sorts of being are supposed to exist inevitably, a (merely) metaphysically necessary being won't, unless its cause's existence and causal action are also necessary. (42–3) Third, more seriously, on Swinburne's definition, none of the three persons of the Trinity (contrary to his intention) is metaphysically necessary, for none is ontologically necessary, and none is caused by an uncaused individual, as each has two permissive causes, namely, the other two persons of the Trinity (Alston 1997, 42–9). Based on conversations with Swinburne, Alston suggests that to satisfy his theoretical aims, Swinburne needs the following revised definition:

A substance S1 is metaphysically necessary if either (1) it is ontologically necessary, or (2) it is everlasting and has no *active* cause of its existence throughout some first (beginningless) period of time, or (3) it is everlasting and is (directly or indirectly *actively* caused to exist through some first (beginningless) period of time by a cause whose backwardly everlasting existence has no *active* cause, inevitably so in virtue of its properties. And any cause of the existence of a type (2) or type (3) being at any time is either (a) one whose backwardly everlasting existence has no *active* cause, or (b) one of which any cause either has no *active* cause for its backwardly everlasting existence or is such that none of its causes has any *active* cause for its backwardly everlasting existence, or... (51, original emphases)

Thus, the special priority of the Father is preserved, in that but for his action, the other two wouldn't exist, whereas his existence doesn't depend on any being's causal activity (52). As to the charge of tritheism, Alston opines that “Swinburne embraces a fairly straightforward form of tritheism” (55). He adds however, that anyone seeking to make the doctrine intelligible, is inevitably going to tilt towards either modalism or tritheism. He suggests that Swinburne's real error lies in his attempt to make the doctrine intelligible at all, which robs the doctrine of its mystery, turning it into “something that any bright philosophy or theology student can clearly grasp here and now”, rather than something that will be understood only “when we see the Triune God face to face” (56; cf. Alston 2005). (See also [section 4](#) below.)

Other critics have been less sympathetic. Brian Leftow objects that in Swinburne's account God is not itself divine. Nor does it makes sense to worship it, as it is not the sort of thing which can be aware of our addressing it. Further, the issue of monotheism isn't the issue of how unified the divine beings are, but rather of how many. And it stretches credibility to interpret the creed's claim that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “one God” to tell us how the three divine beings act. Rather, three persons are numbered in the creeds, but they are said to be only one God. Moreover,

...it is hardly plausible that Greek paganism would have been a form of monotheism had Zeus & Co. been more alike, better behaved, and linked by the right causal connections. (Leftow 1999, 232; cf. Rea 2006)

Moreover, if Swinburne were right, it would be coherent to suppose that both monotheism were true, and that there were an infinity of gods. But that is not coherent (233–4). While one might argue that gods who necessarily act in a unified manner would give us all we care about in monotheism, Leftow argues that this isn't so, as the Bible asserts the existence of precisely one god (235–6). Swinburne's theory entails serious inequalities of power among the Three, jeopardizes the personhood of each, and carries the serious price of allowing (contrary to most theists) that a divine being may be created, and the possibility of more than one divine being (236–40). Using familial analogies, Leftow challenges Swinburne's claim that the Three would lack an overriding reason to produce a fourth, noting that “Cooperating with two to love yet another is a greater ”balancing act“ than cooperating with one to love yet another” (241).

Kelly Clark criticizes Swinburne's theory on four main counts. First, the reasons given for affirming metaphysical rather than ontological necessity of divine beings are unconvincing (Clark 1996, 465–7, 474). Second, the omniscience and omnipotence of the three divine persons would necessarily prevent any clash of wills, rendering Swinburne's postulation of a kind of governing authority exercised by the Father unnecessary (467–70). Third, his position is tritheism. Finally, his readings are not the overall best interpretations of the Nicene and “Athanasian” creeds (471–3).

Dale Tuggy objects that if this theory were true, it would seem that one or more members of the Trinity had wrongfully deceived us by leading us to falsely believe that there is only one divine person. He also argues that the New Testament writings assume that “God” and “the Father of Jesus” are (in all but a few cases) co-referring terms (i.e., God and the Father are assumed to be identical). Denying this last claim, he argues, amounts to an uncharitable and unreasonable attribution of a serious confusion to the New Testament writers and (if they're believed) to Jesus as well (Tuggy 2004).

3.3 Trinity Monotheist Social Trinitarianism

The Trinity monotheist holds there there is one God because there is one Trinity. The term “Trinity monotheism” originates with Leftow (1999, 209), and the best developed such theory is by J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, who embrace the label. (Moreland and Craig 2003, 575–96; Craig 2006) Unlike those in the pro-Nicene tradition, they aim to provide a literal model:

God is an immaterial substance or soul endowed with three sets of cognitive faculties each of which is sufficient for personhood, so that God has three centers of self-consciousness, intentionality, and will.... the persons are [each] divine... since the model describes a God who is tri-personal. The persons are the minds of God. (Craig 2006, 101)

Only the Trinity, on this theory, is an instance of the divine nature, as the divine nature includes the property of being triune; beyond the Trinity “there are no other instances of the divine

nature” (2003, 590). So if “being divine” means “being identical with a divinity” (i.e., being a thing which instantiates the nature divinity), then none of the persons are “divine”. But they don’t put it that way. They say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each “divine” in another sense. They compare the Trinity to the mythical three-headed dog Cerberus, arguing that just as this beast is one dog because it has one body, so the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God because they are three centers of consciousness in one soul (2003, 393).

Daniel Howard-Snyder (2003) offers numerous objections, some of which are as follows. They can’t avoid either polytheism or different levels of divinity, either of which would make their theory (contrary to their intentions) unorthodox. The Cerberus analogy is criticized on the grounds that it would be not one dog with three minds, but rather, three dogs with overlapping bodies. They uphold (with the creeds) one divine substance, and yet by their own criteria each of the three persons must be a substance as well, and they hold that each person is divine. Thus, they seem saddled with polytheism. (393–5) In their view God is not a personal being, in the sense of being numerically identical with a certain personal being, even though it (God) has parts which are persons. They want to say, for example, that each of the three is all-knowing, and they also want to say God is all-knowing, in that he has parts which are all-knowing. But Howard-Snyder objects that,

...there can be no “lending” of a property [i.e., a whole “getting” a property from one of its parts] unless the borrower is antecedently the sort of thing that can have it...[Therefore,] Unless God is antecedently the sort of thing that can act intentionally—that is, unless God is a person—God cannot borrow the property of creating the heavens and the earth from the Son...All other [statements involving] acts attributed to God [in the Bible] will likewise turn out to be, strictly and literally, false. (399–400)

In their view, a thing (God) can exemplify the divine nature without itself being a (identical to) a person. Nor can divinity include properties which require being a person, e.g., being all-knowing, being perfectly free. This, he argues, is “an abysmally low” view of the divine nature, as “If God is not a person or agent, then God does not know anything, cannot act, cannot choose, cannot be morally good, cannot be worthy of worship” (401).

Craig replies to Howard-Snyder’s objection to the Cerberus analogy that the claim that it represents three dogs is “astonishing”, as we all normally speak of two headed snakes, turtles and such (Craig 2003, 102). True, in their view God isn’t identical to any personal being. However, it doesn’t follow that God isn’t personal. He is personal, because he has personal parts, and moreover he’s tripersonal. Further, the view that God isn’t a person

is part and parcel of Trinitarian orthodoxy....Howard-Snyder assumes that God cannot have such properties [i.e., knowledge, choice, moral goodness, worship-worthiness] unless He is a person. But it seems to me that God can have them if God is a soul possessing the rational faculties sufficient for personhood. If God were a soul endowed with a single set of rational faculties, then He could do all these things. By being a more richly endowed soul, is God thereby somehow incapacitated? (105)

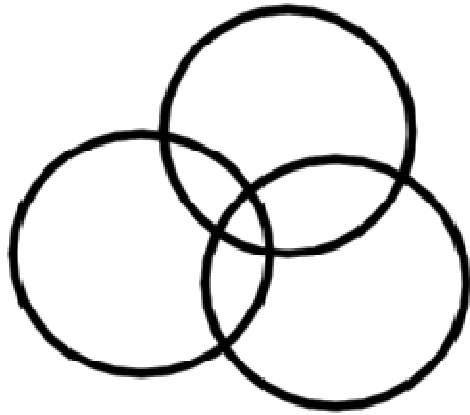
As to the charge of polytheism, he accuses Howard-Snyder of confusing monotheism with unitarianism (106). Finally, he argues that the issue of whether or not the Three count as parts of God is unimportant (107–13).

3.4 Perichoretic Monotheist Social Trinitarianism

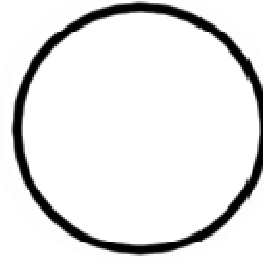
Stephen T. Davis (1999, 2003, 2006) constructs a social trinitarian theory which in his view bridges or straddles the social-Latin divide. Like Swinburne, he gives a philosophical argument for there being more than one divine person. God must be perfect in love, which requires that he loves another. But it is possible that only God exists. Either social trinitarianism is true, or “there is no ‘other’ in the Godhead” (2006, 65). But there must be an “other” in the divine nature, therefore social trinitarianism is true (2006, 65–8; Davis 1999). Unlike Swinburne’s argument, this one doesn’t involve divine persons causing others to exist. Also, it is strictly speaking not an argument for social trinitarianism, as it only tries to prove that there is more than one thing capable of loving and being loved within the divine nature. (Davis 2006, 66–68)

Davis holds that there are three persons, conscious purposive agents, which are essentially and equally divine. None is a cause of any other. These three persons differ “primarily and pre-eminently in their relations to each other” (Davis 2006, 71). The Father “begets” the Son, and these two bear a different relation to the Spirit; but these relations are not causal, but only logical. Whatever any of the three persons does respecting the rest of reality, the other two in some sense do as well, and they are not capable of disagreeing. God is personal (God in some sense contains three persons) but isn’t strictly speaking a person (Davis 2006, 69–71). God just is (identical to) the divine nature or godhead (2006, 75).

Why is this a form of monotheism rather than tritheism? Davis mentions their equally possessing the divine essence, and their inability to disagree, but for him the main factor is that the three enjoy the relation of *perichoresis*, which he expounds as meaning “co-inherence, mutual indwelling, interpenetrating, merging” (2006, 72). It has been objected that the concept of *perichoresis* is too unclear to help us see why three divine persons should be one God (Tuggy 2003, 170–1). Davis admits the unclarity, but appeals to the pro-Nicene tradition of giving admittedly inadequate analogies for the Trinity (2006, 72). (See [section 3.3](#) in the supplementary document on the history of Trinity theories.) He invites us to imagine the contradictory situation of three circles being simultaneously in State 1 and in State 2 (2 representing them as “stacked” or circumscribing the same area).



State 1



State 2

In State 2, we may truly say there are three circles, that there's one circle, or that there are three-in-one, but we may not say there are four (Davis 2006, 73). To the objection that this example is contradictory, he replies that he's not trying to give a consistent model of the Trinity, but only explicating the meaning of *perichoresis*. The Trinity is “at bottom mysterious” (73–4). Davis's theory may be best understood not as a blend of social and Latin trinitarianism, but rather as a blend of social trinitarianism and mysterianism. (See [section 4](#) below.)

3.5 Group Mind Monotheist Social Trinitarianism

Leftow explores the answer, found in some twentieth century theologians, but not much defended in recent philosophical theology, that the three persons are one God because “the Trinity has or is a divine mind composed of the Persons' minds” (1999, 221). Some have suggested that for all we know, all human minds are group minds. As support, they appeal to commissurotomy patients who after their brain hemispheres are divided seem to act as if each half were itself a functioning mind. But then, perhaps, the normal human brain supports a group mind composed of the minds associated with each half.

Granting that it's possible for there to be group minds, Leftow argues that this concept will be no help to the social trinitarian. Thinking of a group mind as a fourth mind emerging from the three divine minds will result in too many divine minds (four). On the other hand, we might think of the Trinity's mind as God's “real” mind, the three others being sub-minds. But this would render the persons of the Trinity less than persons, incapable of truly inter-personal relationships (thus clashing with a major motivation of any social trinitarian theory) (Leftow 1999, 221–4).

C. J. F. Williams tries to avoid this dilemma by positing that the three divine minds share one set of mental states (Williams 1994, 242; Leftow 1999, 224–7). Leftow objects that we have no idea whether or not this is possible (non-contradictory), as we don't know what, if anything, would preserve the distinctness of the minds. Other puzzles arise concerning God and self-reference.

Suppose God thinks “I exist”. What does the term “I” refer to there? Not the Trinity, as it is the persons in whom this thought inheres, and on this theory the Trinity is not identical to any of the persons. But as it inheres equally in each of the persons, it is not clear (as orthodoxy and the New Testament would seem to demand) that each person is able to refer to himself alone or be the primary actor in certain actions (e.g., becoming incarnate, dying on a cross) (Leftow 1999, 225–6).

4. Mysterianism

Often “mystery” is used in a merely honorific sense, meaning a great and important truth or thing relating to religion. In this vein it's often said that the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery to be adored, rather than a problem to be solved. In the Bible a “mystery” (Greek: *mysterion*) is simply a truth or thing which is or has been somehow hidden (i.e., rendered unknowable) by God (Anonymous 1691; Toulmin 1791b). In this sense a “revealed mystery” is a contradiction in terms (Whitby, *Hysterai*, 101-9). While Paul seems to mainly use “mystery” for what *used to be* hidden but is now known (Tuggy 2003, 175), it has been argued that Paul assumes that what has been revealed will continue to be in some sense “mysterious” (Boyer 2007, 98-101).

Mysterianism is a meta-theory of the Trinity, that is, a theory about trinitarian theories, to the effect that an acceptable Trinity theory must, given our present epistemic limitations, to some degree lack understandable content. “Understandable content” here means propositions expressed by language which the hearer “grasps” or understands the meaning of, and which seem to her to be consistent.

At its extreme, a mysterian may hold that no first-order theory of the Trinity is possible, so we must be content with delineating a consistent “grammar of discourse” about the Trinity, i.e., policies about what should and shouldn't be said about it. In this extreme form, mysterianism may be a sort of sophisticated position by itself—to the effect that one repeats the creedal formulas and refuses on principle to explain how, if at all, one interprets them. More common is a moderate form, where mysterianism supplements a Trinity theory which has some understandable content, but which is vague or otherwise problematic. Thus, mysterianism is commonly held as a supplement to one of the theories of sections 1–3 above. Again, it may serve as a supplement not to a full-blown theory (i.e., to a literal model of the Trinity) but rather to one or more (admittedly not very helpful) analogies. (See [section 3.3.1](#) in the supplementary document on the history of trinitarian doctrines.) Unitarian views on the Trinity are often partially motivated by hostility to mysterianism. (See the supplementary document on [unitarianism](#).)

Mysterians view their stance as an exercise of theological sophistication and epistemic humility. Some mysterians appeal to the medieval tradition of *apophatic* or negative theology, the view that one can only say what God is not, but not what God is, while others simply appeal to the idea that the human mind is ill-equipped to think about transcendent realities.

Tuggy lists five different meanings of “mystery” in the literature:

[1]...a truth formerly unknown, and perhaps undiscoverable by unaided human reason, but which has now been revealed by God and is known to some... [2] something we don't completely understand... [3] some fact we can't explain, or can't fully or adequately explain... [4] an unintelligible doctrine, the meaning of which can't be grasped...[5] a truth which one should believe even though it seems, even after careful reflection, to be impossible and/or contradictory and thus false. (Tuggy 2003, 175–6)

Sophisticated mysterians about the Trinity appeal to “mysteries” in the fourth and fifth senses. The common core of meaning between them is that a “mystery” is a doctrine which is (to some degree) not understood, in the sense explained above. We here call those who call the Trinity a mystery in the fourth sense “negative mysterians” and those who call it a mystery in the fifth sense “positive mysterians”. It is most common for theologians to combine the two views, though usually one or the other is emphasized.

Sophisticated latter-day mysterians include Leibniz and the theologian Moses Stuart (1780–1852). (See Antognazza 2007; Leibniz *Theodicy*, 73–122; Stuart 1834, 26–50.)

4.1 Negative Mysterianism

The negative mysterian holds that the true doctrine of the Trinity is not understandable because it is too poor in intelligible content for it to positively seem either consistent or inconsistent to us. In the pro-Nicene consensus this takes the form of refusing to state in literal language what there are three of in God, how they're related to God or to the divine essence, and how they're related to each other. (See [section 3.3](#) in the supplementary document on the history of Trinity theories.) The “persons” of the Trinity, in this way of thinking, are somewhat like three men, but also somewhat like a mind, its thought, and its will, and also somewhat like a root, a tree, and a branch. Multiple incongruous analogies are given, the idea being that a minimal content of the doctrine is thereby expressed, though we remain unable to convert the non-literal claims to literal ones, and may even be unable to express in what respects the analogies do and don't fit. Negative mysterianism goes hand in hand with the doctrines of divine incomprehensibility (that God or God's essence can't be understood completely, at all, or adequately) and divine ineffability (that no human concept, or at least none of some subset of these, applies literally to God). Some recent studies have emphasized the centrality of negative mysterianism to the pro-Nicene tradition of trinitarian thought, chastising recent theorists who seem to feel unconstrained by it (Ayres 2004; Coakley 1999; Dixon 2003).

Opponents of this sort of mysterianism object to it as misdirection, special pleading, neglect of common sense, or even deliberate obfuscation. They emphasize that trinitarian theories are human constructs, and a desideratum of any theory is clarity. We literally can't believe what is expressed by the trinitarian confessions, if we don't grasp the meaning of them, and to the extent that we don't understand a doctrine, it can't guide our other theological beliefs, our actions, or our worship (Cartwright 1987; Dixon 2003, 125–31; Nye 1691b, 47; Tuggy 2003, 176–80). Negative mysterians reply that it is well-grounded in tradition, and that those who are not naively overconfident in human reason expect some unclarity in the content of the doctrine.

4.2 Positive Mysterianism

In contrast, the positive mysterian holds that the trinitarian doctrine can't be understood because of an abundance of content. That is, the doctrine seems to contain explicit or implicit contradictions. So while we grasp the meaning of its individual claims, taken together they seem inconsistent, and so the conjunction of them is not understandable, in the sense explained above. The positive mysterian holds that the human mind is adequate to understand many truths about God, although it breaks down at a certain stage, when the most profound divinely revealed truths are entertained. Sometimes an analogy with recent physics is offered; if we find mysteries (i.e., apparent contradictions) there, such as light appearing to be both a particle and a wave, why should we be shocked to find them in theology? (van Inwagen 1995, 224–7)

The best-developed positive mysterian theory is that of James Anderson, who develops Alvin Plantinga's epistemology so that beliefs in mysteries (merely apparent contradictions) may be rational, warranted, justified, and known (Anderson 2005, 2007). Orthodox belief about the Trinity, Anderson holds, involves one in believing for example, that Jesus is identical to God, the Father is identical to God, and that Jesus and the Father are not identical. Similarly, one must believe that the Son is omniscient, but lacks knowledge about at least one matter. These, he grants, are *apparent* contradictions, but for the believer they are strongly warranted and justified by the divine testimony of scripture. He argues that numerous attempts by recent theologians and philosophers to interpret one of the apparently contradictory pairs in a way that makes the pair consistent always result in a lapse of orthodoxy (Anderson 2007, 11–59). He argues that the Christian should take these trinitarian mysteries to be “MACRUEs”, merely apparent contradictions resulting from unarticulated equivocations, and he gives plausible non-theological examples these (220–5).

One might think that if a claim appears contradictory to a person, she thereby has a strong “defeater” for that belief, i.e., a further belief which robs the first belief of justification and/or warrant. A stock example is a man viewing widgets being made in a factory which appear to be red. The man then learns that a red light is shining on them. In learning this, he acquires a defeater for his belief that all the widgets before him are red. Thus with the Trinity, if the believer discovers an apparent contradiction in (her version of) the doctrine, doesn't that defeat her belief in that doctrine? Anderson argues that it does not, at least, if she reflects properly on the situation. The above thought, Anderson argues, should be countered with the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, which says that we don't know all there is to know about God. Given this truth, the believer should not be surprised to find herself in the above epistemic situation, and so, the believer's trinitarian belief is either insulated from defeat, or if it's already been defeated, that defeat is undone by the preceding realization (2007, 209–54). For other objections and replies, see Anderson 2007, 263–306.

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History of Trinitarian Doctrines

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1. Introduction

This supplementary document discusses the history of trinitarian doctrines. Although early Christian theologians speculated in many ways on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, no one clearly and fully asserted the doctrine of the Trinity as explained at the top of the main entry until around the end of the so-called Arian Controversy. (See [3.2 below](#) and [section 3.1](#) of the supplementary document on unitarianism.) Nonetheless, its proponents always claim it to be in some sense founded on, or at least illustrated by, biblical texts.

Sometimes popular antitrinitarian literature paints the doctrine as strongly influenced by, or even illicitly poached from some non-Christian religious or philosophical tradition. Divine threesomes abound in the religious writings and art of ancient Europe, Egypt, and the near east, not to mention Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. These include various threesomes of male deities, of female deities, of Father-Mother-Son groups, or of one body with three heads, or three faces on one head (Griffiths 1996). However, similarity alone doesn't prove Christian copying or indirect influence, and many of these examples are because of their time and place less likely to have influenced the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

There is, however, arguably a direct influence on early Christian theology by Platonist Jewish philosopher and theologian Philo of Alexandria (a.k.a. Philo Judaeus) (ca. 20 BCE - ca. 50 CE). Inspired by the *Timaeus* of [Plato](#), Philo read various Jewish scriptures as teaching that God created the cosmos by his Word (*logos*) or creative power, and that he subsequently governs the cosmos through the seemingly personal agency of the Word together with that of God's royal power (Philo *Works*; Morgan 1853, 63-148; Norton 1859, 332-74; Wolfson 1973, 60-97).

Another striking parallel, which has been cited by friends and foes of Trinity doctrines, is found in Plotinus' (204–70 CE) triad of the One, Intellect, and Soul, in which the latter two mysteriously emanate from the One, and “are the One and not the One; they are the one because they are from it; they are not the One, because it endowed them with what they have while remaining by itself” (Plotinus *Enneads*, 85).

Many thinkers influential in the development of trinitarian doctrines were steeped in the thought not only of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism, but also the Stoics, Aristotle, and other currents in Greek philosophy (Hanson 1988, 856–869). Whether one sees this background as a providentially supplied and useful tool, or as an unavoidably distorting influence, those developing the doctrine saw themselves as trying to build a systematic Christian theology on the Bible while remaining faithful to earlier post-biblical tradition. Many also had the aim of showing Christianity to be consistent with the best of Greek philosophy. But even if the doctrine had a non-Christian origin, it would not follow that it is false or unjustified; it could be, that through Philo (or whomever), God revealed the doctrine to the Christian church. Still, it is contested issue whether or not the doctrine can be deduced or otherwise inferred from the Christian Bible, so we must turn to it.

2. The Christian Bible

2.1 The Old Testament

No trinitarian doctrine is explicitly taught in the Old Testament. Trinitarians normally grant this, holding that the doctrine was revealed by God only later, in New Testament times (c.50–c.100) and/or in the Patristic era (c. 100–800). They usually also add, though, that with hindsight, we can see that a number of texts either portray or foreshadow the co-working of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For example, in Genesis 18, Yahweh appears to Abraham as three men, and the text has often been read as though the men spoke as one, with one voice. What is this, they urge, if not an appearance of, or even a triple temporary incarnation of the three persons within God's nature? (Other interpretations identify Yahweh with one of the men, the one who stays behind while the others travel to Sodom in Genesis 19.)

In numerous other passages, many Christian readers hold, the preincarnate Son of God is mentioned, or even appears in bodily form to do the bidding of his Father, and is (so they believe) sometimes called the “angel of the Lord”. Some have even identified the preincarnate Christ as Michael, protecting angel over Israel mentioned in the books of Daniel, Jude, and Revelation.

And in several passages, Yahweh refers to himself, or is referred to using plural terms. Non-trinitarians usually read this as a plural of majesty, a form of speech which occurs in many languages, or a conversation between God and angels, while trinitarians often read this as a conversation between the persons of the Trinity.

In sum, Christians read the Old Testament through the lens of the New. For example, the former speaks of God as working by his “word”, “wisdom”, or “spirit”. Some New Testament passages call Jesus Christ the word and wisdom of God, and in the Gospel of John, Jesus talks about the sending of another comforter or helper, the “Holy Spirit”. Thus, some Christians claim the door was open to positing two divine intelligent agents in addition to “the Father”, by, through, or in whom the Father acts, one of whom was incarnated in the man Jesus. In opposition, other Christian readers have taken these passages to involve anthropomorphization of divine attributes, urging that Greek speculations unfortunately encouraged the aforementioned hypostasizations.

2.2 The New Testament

The New Testament contains no explicit trinitarian doctrine. However, many Christian theologians, apologists, and philosophers hold that the doctrine can be inferred from what the New Testament does teach about God. But how may it be inferred? Is the inference deductive, or is it an inference to the best explanation? And is it based on what is implicitly taught there, or on what is merely assumed there? Many Christian theologians and apologists seem to hold it is a deductive inference.

In contrast, other Christians admit that their preferred doctrine of the Trinity not only (1) can't be inferred from the Bible alone, but also (2) that there's inadequate or no evidence for it there, and even (3) that what is taught in the Bible is incompatible with the doctrine. These Christians believe the doctrine solely on the authority of later doctrinal pronouncements of the True Christian Church (typically one of: the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, or the mainstream of the Christian tradition, broadly understood). Some Catholic apologists have argued that this doctrine shows the necessity of the teaching authority of the Church, this doctrine being constitutive of Christianity but underivable from the Bible apart from the Church's guidance in interpreting it. This stance is not popular among Christians who are neither Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox. (2) would be the main sticking point, although some groups deny all three.

Many Christian apologists argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is “biblical” (i.e. either it is implicitly taught there, or it is the best explanation of what is taught there) using three sorts of arguments. They begin by claiming that the Father of Jesus Christ is the one true God taught in the Old Testament. They then argue that given what the Bible teaches about Christ and the Holy Spirit, they must be “fully divine” as well. Thus, we must, as it were, “move them within” the nature of the one God. Therefore, there are three fully divine persons “in God”. While this may be paradoxical, it is argued that this is what God has revealed to humankind through the Bible.

The types of arguments employed to show the “full divinity” of Christ and the Holy Spirit work as follows.

1. S did action A.
2. For any x, if x does action A, x is fully divine.
3. Therefore, S is fully divine.

E.g., A = non-culpably pronouncing the forgiveness of sins, non-culpably receiving worship, raising the dead, truly saying “Before Abraham was, I am”, creating the cosmos.

1. The Bible applies title or description “*F*” to *S*.
2. For any *x*, if the Bible applies title “*F*” to *x*, then *x* is fully divine.
3. Therefore, *S* is fully divine.

E.g., *F* = the first and the last, a god, the God, our savior

1. *S* has quality *Q*.
2. For any *x*, if *x* has quality *Q*, then *x* is fully divine.
3. *S* is fully divine.

E.g., *Q* = sinlessness, omniscience, the power to perform miracles, something Christians should be baptized in the name of

While such arguments are deductively valid, they suffer from a crucial ambiguity: What is meant by “fully divine”? Until this is made clear, it isn't clear which of the trinitarian theories is being argued for. A person being “fully divine” might, according to various theorists, amount to being constituted by the matter-like divine nature, being identical to God, being a mind of God, being a way God relates to himself or the world, and so on. Further, the epistemic status of each argument's second premise may depend on what “divine” means.

Opponents of these sorts of argument typically give biblical counterexamples to the second premise (e.g., humans who are called “gods” but aren't divine in the relevant sense, humans who are authorized by God to forgive sins but aren't divine in the relevant sense). In other cases, they also challenge the first premise (e.g., Jesus denied being omniscient, there are inadequate grounds to say that the Son of God created the cosmos).

Another form of argument runs as follows.

1. Passage *E* is a true prophecy predicting that the God of Israel, Yahweh, will do action *A*.
2. Passage *F* truly asserts that the prophecy in *E* was fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ.
3. Therefore, Jesus Christ just is the God of Israel, Yahweh.

Opponents reply that this argument is invalid; it is possible for the premises to be true even though the conclusion is false. Even though the prediction “George W. Bush will conquer Iraq” may be said to be fulfilled by the actions of General Smith, it doesn't follow that Smith and Bush are one and the same. Rather, Smith acted as the agent of Bush. Similarly, Yahweh acts through his servant Jesus. Another disadvantage of this argument is that even if it is sound, the conclusion is undesirable. If Jesus and God are held to be (numerically) identical, and one adds that the Father is “fully divine” in this same sense, i.e. the Father is numerically identical to God, then it logically follows that Jesus just is (is numerically identical to) the Father. And yet, according to any trinitarian, some things are true of one that are not true of the other. This is why nearly all trinitarian theories decline to identify more than one of the three persons with God. On the other hand, some embrace this as a mystery —something which *appears* contradictory but is in fact true. (See main entry [section 4.2](#).)

This traditional case for the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit may be best construed not as a collection of deductive arguments, but rather as an inference to the best explanation, an attempt

to infer what best explains all the biblical texts considered together. In this genre, however, alternate explanations are rarely explored in any detail, much less shown to be inferior.

Many arguments of the above types date back to ancient times, and have been repeated in similar forms whenever mainstream trinitarianism has been attacked (Beckwith 2007; Bowman 2007; Bowman and Komoszewski 2007; George 2006; Stuart 1834; Waterland 1856a-e). A number of well developed refutations of these arguments dating from the 17th to 19th centuries have been largely forgotten by present-day theologians, philosophers, and apologists (Burnap 1845; Clarke 1978; Crellius *Racovian*; Emlyn 1746; Haynes 1797; Lardner 1793; Lindsey 1776, 1818; Norton 1859; Nye 1691b; Priestley 1791a-c; Wilson 1846).

3. Development of Creeds

3.1 Up to 325 CE

It has been hotly disputed what sort of trinitarianism, if any, early Christian theologians held. Mainstream theologians often read them as implicit Latin or pro-Nicene trinitarians, or at least as heading in the direction of the later pro-Nicene “consensus”. In contrast, unitarians appeal to early theologians as illustrating that early Christianity was simply not trinitarian, but rather held God and the Father to be numerically identical. And various later subordinationists (see [section 3](#) of the supplementary document on unitarianism) appeal to these authors to support the idea that the Son of God is in some sense ontologically dependent on God, the Father (whom they identify with Yahweh). Both the terminology and ideas of these early authors are non-standard, and so no proper survey of these works is possible here.

In brief, the focus was not on any trinitarian dogma *per se*, but rather on the nature of God, the nature of Christ, and how they are related. The man Jesus (or the divine pre-existent being united to him, or the union of the two) was variously called a “second god”, an “angel”, or the “wisdom” or “mind” of God, and was usually held to pre-exist his time in Mary's womb, to be “begotten” from the mind and/or will of the Father (either timelessly or at some time) and to be, in some sense “divine” and worthy of worship and prayer. And some writers, dubbed “monarchians” held that the Father and Son were one and the same person and being (Pelikan 1971, 176–182). The status of the Holy Spirit (power of the Father, the divine element in Jesus, a divine person?) was more ambiguous, seldom being a topic of dispute, and the Holy Spirit was not an object of prayer or worship in early Christianity.

3.2 325–381: The Arian Controversy

It was only in response to the controversy sparked by the teachings of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius (ca. 256–336) that a critical mass of bishops rallied around what eventually became standard language about the Trinity. This controversy was complex, and has been much illuminated by recent historians (Ayres 2004; Hanson 1988; Pelikan 1971; Rubenstein 1999; Williams 2001). It can be briefly summarized as follows. Arius taught, in accordance with an earlier subordinationist theological tradition, that the Son of God was a creature, made by God from nothing a finite time ago. Some time around 318–21 a controversy broke out, with Arius' teaching opposed initially by his bishop Alexander of Alexandria (d. 326). Alexander examined

and excommunicated Arius. Numerous churchmen, adhering to subordinationist traditions about the Son rallied to Arius' side, while others, favoring theologies holding to the eternal existence of the Son and his (in some sense) ontological equality with the Father, joined his opponents. The dispute threatened to split the church, and a series of councils ensued, variously excommunicating and vindicating Arius and his defenders, or their opponents. Each side successively tried to win the favor of the then-current emperor, trying to manipulate imperial power to crush its opposition.

From the standpoint of later orthodoxy, a key episode in this series occurred in 325, when a council of bishops convened by the Emperor Constantine (ca. 280–337) decreed that the Father and Son were *homoousios* (same substance or essence). Arius and his party were excommunicated. The intended meaning of *ousia* here is far from clear, given the term's complex history and use, and the failure of the council to disambiguate it (Stead 1994, 160–72). They most likely settled on the term because it was disagreeable to the Arians. This ambiguous formula fanned the flames of controversy, as subordinationists and anti-subordinationists understood the phrase differently when signing on to it, and later argued for conflicting interpretations of it.

By the time of the council of Constantinople (381 CE), an anti-subordinationist reading, vigorously championed by Alexandrian bishop Athanasius (d. 373) had the upper hand; *homoousios* was understood as asserting the Father and Son to not merely be similar beings, but in some sense one being. While it stopped short of saying that the Holy Spirit was *homoousios* with the Father and Son, the council did say that the Holy Spirit “is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son”, and added in a letter accompanying their creed that the three share “a single Godhead and power and substance” (Leith 1982, 33; Tanner 1990, 24, 28). Over the ensuing period the same sorts of arguments used to promote the divinity of the Son, were reapplied to the Holy Spirit, and eventually inhibitions to applying *homoousios* to the Holy Spirit evaporated.

Athanasius and others in the prevailing party argued that the salvation of humans requires the Son and Holy Spirit to be equally divine with the Father. This kind of argument depends on various controversial models of salvation, such as the one on which salvation involves the “deification” or “divinization” of humans, which can only be accomplished by one who is himself divine (Rusch 1980, 22–23). Despite shifting convictions about what salvation is and how God accomplishes it, this basic sort of argument remains popular—that if Christ and/or the Holy Spirit were not in some sense “fully divine”, then humanity couldn't be saved by their actions. (For an influential medieval argument, see Anselm *Cur.*) Perhaps the most currently popular such argument is that our forgiveness by God, an infinitely valuable being, requires an atoning sacrifice of infinite value. Hence, Christ has to be fully divine, as only a fully divine being has infinite value.

3.3 The pro-Nicene Consensus

Around the time of the Council of Constantinople, as imperial and ecclesial forces were systematically extinguishing subordinationist groups in the eastern and western empires (Wiles 1996, 27–40), the kind of trinitarianism which finally prevailed within the mainstream

institutions of Christianity began to gel into a recognizable form. Following Hanson (1988) and Ayres (2004) we call this the “pro-Nicene consensus”. This consensus spanned the east-west (Greek-Latin) divide. Thus, to present this view we summarize the accounts of two influential theorists, one from each side of this cultural and linguistic divide: Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine of Hippo. (General criticisms of this sort of trinitarianism are discussed in [section 4](#) of the main text.)

3.3.1 Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 395) is now known as one of the Cappadocian Fathers, the other two being his older brother Basil of Caesarea (ca. 329–79) and Gregory Nazianzus (329–89). These three active bishops are credited with establishing a consistent terminology for the Trinity, namely using *hypostasis* or *prosopon* for what God is three of, and *ousia* (along with *phusis*) for what God is one of. (On their lives, careers, and extant writings, see Ayres 2004 and Hanson 1996.) We look briefly at Nyssa's views here, as illustrating several points about the pro-Nicene consensus.

Nyssa notoriously compares the Trinity to three human beings (Nyssa *Answer*, 256). Largely on this basis, he (and the other Cappadocians) have been interpreted as proto-social trinitarians (see [section 3](#) of the main text), holding the three persons to be three subjects of consciousness and action, of the same kind, *homoousios* in the way that any two examples of a natural kind are, such as two humans (Plantinga 1986). However, it has been objected that the three human analogy was suggested by his opponents; it is neither Nyssa's only nor his main analogy for the Trinity (Coakley 1999).

In Nyssa's letter *An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There are Three Gods* he responds to an objection passed on by his correspondent, the younger bishop Ablabius: even though three men share a single humanity, we call them “three men”, so if Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a single divinity, why shouldn't we call them “three gods”? (Nyssa *Answer*, 256–7) After a flippant answer, he argues that both ways of speaking are on a par, but they are both incorrect; that is, both talk of many gods and of many men involve “a customary misuse of language” (257). In both cases, he argues that the general term refers to the single, common nature. More accurately, he adds, the term “godhead” refers only to a divine operation of seeing or beholding, as “His nature cannot be named and is ineffable” (259). Moreover, the Bible ascribes this operation equally to each of the three (260). Does it not follow that there are three seers, “three gods who are beheld in the same operation” (261)? Nyssa argues that it does not.

In the case of men... since we can differentiate the action of each while they are engaged in the same task, they are rightly referred to in the plural....With regard to the divine nature, on the other hand, it is otherwise....Rather does every operation which extends from God to creation... have its origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach its completion by the Holy Spirit. For the action of each in any matter is not separate and individualized. But whatever occurs... occurs through the three Persons, and is not three separate things....we cannot enumerate as three gods those who jointly, inseparably, and mutually exercise their divine power... (261–2; cf. 266)

We're unable to differentiate, Nyssa thinks, any distinct works of the persons. The word "deity" (or "Godhead") signifies only a certain work. Therefore, we're unable to count, and shouldn't speak of three distinct deities (261-4).

A problem with Nyssa's argument is that words like "work", "operation", and "action" can refer to either an activity (exercise of a thing's powers) or the result thereof. Thus, a series of plannings and drawings, etc., or the resulting building can be called what a certain architect did (or his work, operation, action). And one thing or event may be the result of a great many activities by different agents, as when dozens of construction workers contribute their actions to one result, such as a building (or the coming into existence of a building). Nyssa siezes on examples of the actions of the Father, Son, and Spirit having a single result. But though their "operation" (i.e. result) is one, it doesn't follow that they or their actions are one. Moreover, Nyssa speaks of the divine persons in the plural, and holds them to differ. While the divine nature is "undifferentiated", the three persons differ causally.

To say that something [i.e. the Father] exists without generation explains the mode of its existence. But what it is is not made evident by the expression. (267)

Thus, while it is left unclear what the persons are, it is emphasized that a distinction between them hasn't been obliterated. Being a Platonist about universals, he holds that the Three share one universal nature (i.e. deity). But he is hard pressed to show why it doesn't follow that there are three gods (264-6). In the end, his main aim is simply to uphold the mysterious tradition passed down to him (257; cf. Nyssa *Great*, ch. 1-3).

The bedrock of pro-Nicene trinitarianism is a metaphysics of God as unique, simple (lacking any sort of parts, composition, or differing aspects) and therefore incomprehensible (we can't grasp all truths about God, or any truths about God's essential nature) and ineffable (such that no human concept applies literally to it). Thus as Ayres notes,

Pro-Nicenes assume that one can draw no analogies between God and creation that will either deliver knowledge of God's essence or that can involve us in grasping clearly where and why an analogy fails. (Ayres 2004, 284)

Any analogy offered is therefore quickly supplemented by others. Its opponents view this as obfuscation, while its proponents consider the differing analogies to be complimentary and in some sense informative. While pro-Nicenes hold the persons to be (somehow) distinct, they show little interest in developing a metaphysical account of what it is to be a divine person. In sum, the Nicene pattern of speech and thought about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is held by them to be spiritually beneficial, but it doesn't admit of clarification.

3.3.2 Augustine

Recent scholarship locates Augustine firmly in the pro-Nicene tradition. His mammoth *On the Trinity* (Latin: *De Trinitate*), the final product of his thoughts on the Trinity, has been endlessly mined by later theologians, but seems to contain no developed theory of the Trinity, in the sense

of a metaphysical model of the persons, their relations to each other, and their relations to one divine essence or nature.

Augustine was concerned to defend the trinitarianism of the Constantinopolitan creed against lingering “Arianism” and other heresies, confessing that this “is also my faith inasmuch as it is the Catholic faith” (Augustine *Trinity*, 70). He argues that the Bible implicitly teaches this sort of trinitarianism, on which the rest of the book is an extended meditation. This meditation, he concedes, fails to yield much by way of understanding. He holds that sin has corrupted our minds, so that we can't understand the doctrine, which we should still hope to understand in the next life (230–2, 435, 430). At the end he confesses “among all these things that I have said about that supreme trinity... I dare not claim that any of them is worthy of this unimaginable mystery” (434). Indeed, near the beginning he pictures the whole book as a grudging concession to certain unnamed Christians, “talkative reason-mongers who have more conceit than capacity”, who conclude that their teachers don't know what they are talking about, simply because those teachers are reluctant to speak of deep truths (67). Augustine's goal is not so much to understand the Trinity and communicate this to others, but rather to say some things that will deliver a small shred of understanding, which may entice the reader to pursue the experience of God (434–7). Because of this dim view of what humans are equipped to understand, much of the book is actually about how to talk about the Trinity, rather than about the Trinity itself. We may at least confess the correct doctrine, even if only later we come to understand what we've been saying.

Augustine suggests that the standard creedal term “person” (Greek: *hypostasis* or *prosopon*; Latin: *persona*) is adopted simply so that something may be said in answer to the question “What is God three of?” (224–30, 241, 398) Even though no genus or species concept we have applies to God, still, humans may be aware of God, as they are aware of love, and God is love (Book VIII). While this gives no insight into God's essential nature, it at least presents us with an object of spiritual pursuit.

Despite this pronounced negative mysterian note (see [section 4.1](#) of the main entry), the book is famous for what later authors call “psychological analogies” of the Trinity. Augustine reasons that if we can't catch intellectual sight of the Trinity directly, at least we can see reflections, images, or indications of the Trinity in the created realm, above all in the highest part of human beings (the mind), who are made “in the image and likeness of God” (Augustine *Trinity*, 231; Genesis 1:26). In the human mind we may encounter several “trinities”, given here in the order that they somehow correspond to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

- lover, loved object, the lover's love for that object (255)
- the mind, its knowledge, its love (272–5)
- the mind's remembering itself, understanding itself, and willing itself (298–9)
- memory, understanding, and will (374–82)
- the mind's remembering God, understanding God, and willing God (383–92)
- existing, knowing that one exists, loving the fact that one exists (Augustine *City*, 483-4 [XI.26])

These are taken to be “images” of the Trinity, with the final three being in some sense the most accurate. (He also discusses a few “trinities” or threefold processes which he doesn't hold to be images of the Trinity.) Although he apparently considers the contemplation of these to be helpful in the pursuit of God, in the last section (Book XV) of *De Trinitate*, Augustine emphasizes that

even these are “immeasurably inadequate” to represent God (428). The main reason is that these three are activities which a person does or faculties a person has, whereas God “just is” his memory, understanding, and will; the doctrine of divine simplicity thus renders the mental analogies *at best* minimally informative. Further, temporal processes seem ill-suited to represent the nature of an essentially immutable God.

Augustine has often been read and criticized as a modalist or near-modalist, as many of his analogies, if taken as literal models of the Trinity, would render the persons (or two of them) modes of God. Another potentially modalist line of thought derives from the following problem. Augustine holds that God is simple and thus essentially immutable. Words which are predicated “accidentally” of creatures, such as good or wise, are predicated of God essentially. Applied to us, these words signify properties we happen to possess, and which we might have not possessed, but applied to God, they all indicate the same thing, God's simple essence. What about terms such as “Father” and “Son”? As God can't have accidental features, these can't be predicated accidentally. But Augustine doesn't want to say that they are essentially predicated either. He suggests that they are relationally predicated, that is, applied to God not because of his essence or accidents, but rather because of how God is related to himself. He explores but ultimately rejects the idea that all true predication of God is relational (Books V-VII). He finally holds that some terms apply equally to each of the three divine persons, whereas certain relational terms apply primarily to one of the three. In sum,

This Trinity is one God: it is simple even though it is a Trinity... because it is what it has, except insofar as one Person is spoken of in relation to another. (Augustine *City*, 462 [XI.10])

It is left unclear how a simple being may in some sense contain multiple inter-related Persons. All these themes have been further developed and applied in new ways by later thinkers. (See sections [4.1](#), on Thomas Aquinas, and [4.2](#), on John Duns Scotus, below, and [section 2.1](#) of the main text, on Brian Leftow.) To the charge of modalism, though, Augustine may plead that his assertions about the Trinity don't have enough literal content to be any variety of modalism. He is rather a negative mysterian. (See main entry, [section 4](#).)

Important medieval philosopher-theologians not discussed here who develop Augustine's trinitarianism include Boethius (ca. 480–525) and Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) (Marenbon 2003, 66–95; Mann 2004).

3.3.3 The “Athanasian” Creed

The so-called Athanasian Creed (also known by the Latin words it begins with, as the *Quicumque vult*) is a widely adopted and beloved formulation of the doctrine. It shows strong Augustinian influence, and is thought to be the product of an unknown early 6th century writer. Contemporary philosophical discussions often begin with this creed, at it puts pro-Nicene trinitarianism into a memorably short and palpably paradoxical form.

It reads, in part,

Whoever wants to be saved should above all cling to the catholic faith. Whoever does not guard it whole and inviolable will doubtless perish eternally. Now this is the catholic faith: We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being. For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Spirit is still another. But the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory, coeternal in majesty. What the Father is, the Son is, and so is the Holy Spirit. Uncreated... infinite... eternal... And yet there are not three eternal beings, but one who is eternal... Almighty is the Father... And yet there are not three almighty beings, but one who is almighty. Thus the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God: And yet there are not three gods, but one God...not three lords, but one Lord. As Christian truth compels us to acknowledge each distinct person as God and Lord, so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords. The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten; the Son was neither made nor created, but was alone begotten of the Father; the Spirit was neither made nor created, but is proceeding from the Father and the Son. Thus there is one Father, not three fathers; one Son, not three sons; one Holy Spirit, not three spirits. And in this Trinity, no one is before or after, greater or less than the other; but all three persons are in themselves, coeternal and coequal; and so we must worship the Trinity in unity and the one God in three persons. Whoever wants to be saved should think thus about the Trinity. (Anonymous *Athanasian*)

By the latter part, it follows by the indiscernibility of identicals that no person of the Trinity is identical with any other. And by the earlier part, it seems to follow that there are thus at least three eternal (etc.) things. But it asserts there's only one eternal thing. Hence, the creed seems contradictory, and has been attacked as such (Biddle 1691, i; Nye 1691a, 11; Priestley 1871, 321). Showing where the above argument for inconsistency goes wrong is a major motivation of recent "Latin" theories (see [section 2](#) of the main entry). In contrast, positive mysterians hold that it somehow goes wrong, though no one can say quite where. (See [section 4.2](#) of the main entry.) Finally, some simply reject the creed.

4. Medieval Theories

Church council decisions are treated by Catholicism and Orthodoxy much like supreme court decisions in American jurisprudence. While early rulings may be bent and twisted to meet new needs, they are at least in theory inviolable precedents. Thus, the structure of Christian churches ensured that these boundaries weren't violated, and theorizing about the Trinity from around 400 CE until the Reformation (c. 1517) was forcibly kept within the bounds of creedal orthodoxy. Thus, most medieval trinitarian theories are essentially elaborations on the pro-Nicene consensus in a more confident and metaphysical mode. That is, they adhere strictly to the creedal statements as well as writings of their tradition's most authoritative church fathers, but are less reticent to give fuller accounts of what the persons are and how they are related to one another and to God or the divine essence.

There were short-lived exceptions to this conformity; periodically, allegedly tritheistic trinitarian theories were proposed and quickly suppressed (Pelikan 1978, 264–7; Pohle 1919, 255–63; Tavard 1997; see also the section on Tritheism in the entry on [John Philoponus](#)).

For the complicated trinitarian theory of Peter Abelard see Brower 2005 and the section on Theology in the entry on [Peter Abelard](#).

4.1 Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas sets out a highly developed and difficult trinitarian theory (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.1–26, *Summa Theologiae* I.27–43). God is “pure act”, that is, he has no potentialities of any kind. God is also utterly simple, with no distinct parts, properties, or actions. We may truly say, though, that God understands and wills. These divine processes are reflexive relations which are the persons of the Trinity. The Word eternally generated by God is a *hypostasis*, what Aristotle calls a first substance, which shares the essence of God, but which is nonetheless “relationally distinct” from God. The persons of the Trinity, as they share the divine essence, are related more closely than things which are merely tokens of a kind (e.g., identical twins), but he seems to hold that none are identical to either of the others (they are truly three). Aquinas develops Augustine's idea that the “persons” of the Trinity are individuated by their relations. For Aquinas, the relations Paternity, Sonship, and Spirithood are real and distinct things in some sense “in” God, which “constitute and distinguish” the three persons of the Trinity (Hughes 1989, 197). The persons are distinct *per relationes* (as to their relations) but not distinct *per essentiam* (as to their essence or being). In the words of one commenter,

[For Aquinas,] relations both constitute and distinguish the divine persons: insofar as relations are the divine essence (*secundum res*) [i.e. they're the same thing], they constitute those persons, and insofar as they are relations with converses, they distinguish those persons. (Hughes 1989, 217)

But how may these relations be, constitute, or somehow give rise to *three* divine *hypostaseis* when each *just is* the divine essence? For if each is the divine essence, won't it follow that each just is (i.e. is identical to) both of the others as well? Aquinas holds that it does *not* follow—that would amount to modalism, not orthodox trinitarianism. To show why it doesn't follow, he distinguishes between *identitas secundum rem et rationem* (sameness of thing and of concepts) and mere *identitas secundum rem* (sameness of thing). To the preceding objection, then, Aquinas says that the alleged consequence would follow only if the persons were the same both in thing and in concept. But they are not; they are merely the same thing.

This move is puzzling. Aquinas holds that the three are not merely similar or derived from the same source, but are in *some* strong sense the same, but *not* identical (i.e. numerically the same) which he appears to understand as sameness in both thing and concept. Even this last is surprising; one would think that for Aquinas “sameness in thing” just is identity, and that “sameness in concept” would mean that we apply the same concept to some apparent things (whether or not they are in fact one or many). Christopher Hughes holds that Aquinas is simply confused, his desire for orthodoxy having led him into this (and other) necessary falsehoods. On Hughes's reading, Aquinas does think of “sameness in thing” as identity, but he incoherently holds it to be non-transitive (i.e. if *A* and *B* are identical, and *B* and *C* are identical, it doesn't follow that *A* and *C* are identical), while in some contexts assuming (correctly) that it is transitive (Hughes 1989, 217–40).

The interpretation of Aquinas on these points is difficult. Other recent philosophers, more sympathetic to Aquinas' trinitarian theory, have not tried to salvage the entire theory, but have, with the help of various distinctions not explicitly made by Aquinas, sought to salvage his basic approach. This involves developing and trying to vindicate his apparently modalistic approach to the persons (which seem to be God's relating to himself in three ways), showing how these relations may in fact be substantial persons, or specifying a relation which the persons may each bear to the divine essence which is something short of (classical, absolute) identity but much like it. (See [section 2](#) of the main text.)

4.2 John Duns Scotus

Richard Cross has recently argued that John Duns Scotus (1265/6–1308) has an unjustly neglected trinitarian theory, “one of the most compelling and powerfully coherent accounts of the Trinity ever constructed” (Cross 2005, 159).

Realists about universals hold that in addition to individual humans, there is a universal thing, or “common nature” called “humanity” (Each individual human, for example Peter, is an “instance of” this common nature, humanity. Similarly, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three “exemplifications” of the “universal” called “divinity”.) However, divinity, unlike humanity, is not “divided in” its instances or exemplifications; that is, while three instances of humanity amount to three humans, three exemplifications of divinity don't amount to three divine beings. Rather, each of the three exemplifications (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is the one God. Thus, the persons are related to God somewhat as concrete things are related to the universals of which they are examples (Cross 1999, 61–71). Indeed, the divine nature or essence is a universal, although it is also a substance (a.k.a. substantial individual, subsistent thing, thing with *per se* existence) (Cross 2005, 181). Further, though it is a substance, it is also “that power in virtue of which a divine person can produce other divine persons” (Cross 2005, 206).

How are the persons related to each other? They have the divine nature in common. They are related to each other in a way somehow similar to two physical objects which are simultaneously made of the same stuff or matter (this is merely an analogy—Scotus doesn't believe God or any divine person to be partly composed of matter). The persons, as it were, partially but don't entirely “overlap”, as each is also partly composed of a unique personal property, not had by the two others. Each person, in Scotus's terms, is “essentially identical” with the divine essence, but not “formally” or “hypostatically” identical. In the same way, Peter is essentially identical with humanity, but isn't formally identical with it, having his own haecceity (his own individual essence, or “thisness”) not had by any other human. But whereas Peter and Paul are “really distinct”, the persons of the Trinity are not, at least if being “really distinct” implies being separable (Cross 1999, 69). Further, as Cross explicates this view, the divine nature or essence is nothing more than “the overlap of” the persons, which saves it from being some fourth divine thing in God (Cross 2005, 166). Nonetheless, it is metaphysically “prior to” the persons, in the sense of being the form in virtue of which the three relations obtain. Moreover, this essence “immediately determines” the Father, and only through him is it determined to the Son and Spirit. This process is causal, but does not imply, Scotus holds, that the Son and Spirit are subordinate to the Father, or that they are imperfect or less divine than he (Cross 2005, 176–80, 245–8).

The Son and Spirit are produced willingly but necessarily, the Son being the divine Word as generated by God's memory, as had by the Father. The Holy Spirit is God's love for his own essence. Like Augustine, he holds that the persons are distinguished by their relational properties, but he does this on the basis of church tradition, not because he finds anything impossible in the supposition that the persons are distinguished by absolute (non-relational) properties. While the relational properties of paternity, sonship, and being spirated constitute the three persons, he denies that those are their only unique properties (Cross 1999, 62–7). These properties are supposed to explain why the persons, unlike the divine essence, are not communicable (Cross 2005, 163).

Is it possible for anything to be related as Scotus thinks the members of the Trinity are to the divine essence? As Cross asks, “if the divine essence is indivisible, how can it be instantiated by three different persons?” (Cross 1999, 68) Scotus claims that the divine essence is “repeatable” or “communicable” without being “divisible” (Cross 1999, 68). He gives a soul-body analogy: just as the intellective soul is equally in each organ without being “divided” or composed of parts, so the divine essence relates to the three persons. But the divine essence is the only universal, he holds, which is communicable in this way.

Scotus gives some perfect-being and other arguments to the effect that there must be two and only two productions within God, and only one unproduced producer (the Father, not the divine nature in him). Moreover, the divine essence, being a “quiddity” (exemplifiable or communicable thing) exists in or as some non-exemplifiable thing or *suppositum*, here, the person of the Father (Cross 2005, 127–52).

This theory hasn't been much discussed; few Christian thinkers past or present have claimed to understand it. Since the Reformation era, many theologians and philosophers have been impatient with this sort of confident metaphysical speculation, preferring to dismiss it as learned nonsense. However, Cross has painstakingly laid out its motivations and content.

One line of objection would be that the theory is obscure and *ad hoc*, as among all universals only *divinity* is capable of being multiply instantiated without there being multiple individual things of that kind. One might also worry whether Scotus is entitled to equate something as seemingly abstract as a universal (the divine essence) plus a particular property with a substantial, personal being.

5. Post-Medieval Developments

Starting in the great upheaval of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation many Christians re-examined the New Testament and rejected many later developments as incompatible with apostolic doctrine, lacking adequate basis in it, and often as contrary to reason as well. Initially, many Reformation leaders de-emphasized the trinitarian doctrine, and seemed unsure whether or not to confine it to the same waste bin as the doctrines of papal authority and transubstantiation (Williams 2000, 459–60). In the end, though, those in what historians call the “Magisterial Reformation” decisively fell in line on behalf of creedal orthodoxy (roughly in line with the post-Nicene consensus), while other groups, now described as the “Radical Reformation”, either downplayed it, ignored it, or denied it as inconsistent with the Bible and reason. This led to

several controversies between creedal trinitarians and what came to be called “unitarians” (earlier, “Socinians”) about biblical interpretation, christology, and the Christian doctrine of God, from the mid 16th to the mid 19th centuries. (See the supplementary document on [unitarianism](#).)

As history played out, the practically non-trinitarian groups and some of the antitrinitarian groups evolved into trinitarian ones. Although unitarian and alternative views of the Trinity have repeatedly re-emerged in various Christian and quasi-Christian movements, the vast majority of Christians and Christian groups today at least in theory adhere to the authority of the Constantinopolitan and “Athanasian” creeds. At the same time, theologians have lamented that many Christian groups are arguably functionally non-trinitarian (though not antitrinitarian) or nearly so in their piety and preaching.

In recent theology, the Trinity has become a popular subject for speculation, and its practical relevance for worship, marriage, gender relations, religious experience, and politics, has been repeatedly asserted. (See [section 3](#) of the main text.) It has fallen to Christian philosophers and philosophically aware theologians to sort out what precisely the doctrine amounts to, and to defend it against charges of inconsistency and unintelligibility.

The doctrine's basis or lack of basis in the New Testament, so vehemently debated from the 16th through the 19th centuries, is not presently a popular topic of debate. This is probably because some theologians hold the attempt to derive the doctrine from the Bible to be hopelessly naive, while other theologians, many Christian philosophers and apologists accept the common arguments (see [section 2.2](#) above) as decisive. Again, the postmodernist view that there are no better or worse interpretations of texts may play a role in quenching interest among academic theologians. Finally, it may simply be that trust in the mainstream tradition, or in various particular Christian traditions, currently runs high; many confess trinitarianism simply because their church officially does, or because it and/or the mainstream tradition tells them that the Bible teaches it. Distrust of councils and post-biblical religious authorities has largely evaporated, even among Protestants from historically anti-clerical and non-creedal groups. Ecumenical movements, and anti-sectarian sentiments probably also play a role in deflecting attention from the issues, in that to many it seems perverse to attack one of the few doctrines on which all the main, dominant Christian groups are in agreement.

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