

Identity and Attribution in the Trinity

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I

Philosophers of religion often argue about whether certain religious doctrines (e.g. monotheism) are true. They also argue about whether certain religious doctrines are consistent (i.e. free from contradiction). Thus while some philosophers have argued that it is inconsistent to suppose that a perfectly good God created a world containing evil, others have argued (rightly, in my view) that there is no inconsistency in that supposition. One religious doctrine whose consistency has been a matter of long-standing dispute among philosophers of religion is the doctrine of the Trinity.

Why might someone think that the doctrine of the Trinity is *inconsistent*? Well, the doctrine of the Trinity implies that:

- (1) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are (three) different persons.
- (2) The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.
- (3) There is just one God.

And, it might be thought, (1) - (3) are inconsistent.

Suppose someone says that the baker is Bob, and the butcher is Bob. If she has said something true, it seems, either the baker is (a) Bob, and the butcher is (a different) Bob, or the baker is (a) Bob, and the butcher is (that same) Bob. In just the same way, it seems, if the Father is God, and the Son is God, then either the Father is (a) God, and the Son is (a different) God, or the Father is (a) God, and the Son is (that same) God. (Another, more idiomatic, way to say that the Father is (a) God and the Son is (that same) God is to say that the Father is God, and the Son is too).

If the Father is a God, and the Son is a different God, then there are two different Gods (the God the Father is, and the (different) God the Son is). And if there are two different Gods, then there isn't just one God (as (3) says). We may conclude that, if the Father is a God, and the Son is a different God, (1) - (3) cannot all be true.

If on the other hand, the Father is a God, and the Son is that same God, then there is no contradiction in the supposition that the Father is a God, and the Son is a God, and yet there is just one God (as (3) says). But if the Father is a God, and the Son is that same God, can it be true that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three different persons (as (1) says)? Well, if the Father and the Son are different persons, and the Father is God, and the Son is that same God, then - it would seem to follow - the Father and the Son are different persons, but the same God. Is this possible? Not a few philosophers have argued that if K and K^* are kinds of thing (person, God, human, hamster, or the like), there is a contradiction in supposing that different K s are the same K^* .¹ Their argument has the following structure:

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To say that Eric Blair and George Orwell are the same man is to say that Eric Blair is a man, and George Orwell is a man, and Eric Blair is the same as George Orwell. More generally, to say that x and y are the same K is to say that x is a K , and y is a K , and x is the same as y . In the same way, to say that Jerry Garcia and Phil Lesh are different men is to say that Jerry Garcia is a man, and Phil Lesh is a man, and Jerry Garcia is different from (not the same as) Phil Lesh. More generally, to say that x and y are different K s is to say that x and y are K s, and x is different from (not the same as) y .

Now suppose that x and y were different K s, but the same K^* . It would follow that (a) x and y are K s, and x is different from (not the same as) y , and (b) x and y are K^* s, and x is the same as y . But (a) and (b) are inconsistent, since (a) says that x is not the same as y , and (b) says that x is the same as y . So it cannot happen that x and y are different K s, but the same K^* .

Suppose this argument is sound. Then the Father and the Son could not be different persons, but the same God, since that would imply that both i) the Father and the Son are persons, and the Father is different from the Son, and ii) the Father and the Son are Gods, and the Father is the same as (not different from) the Son. This implies that *The Father and the Son are different persons* and *The Father is (a) God, and the Son is (the same) God* cannot both be true together. Thus if the Father is a God, and the Son is the same God, (1) - (3) cannot all be true.

Drawing the threads together, we have the following argument against the consistency of the doctrine of the Trinity:

Necessarily, if (2) is true, the Father is a God and the Son is a different God, or the Father is a God and the Son is the same God. If the Father is a God, and the Son is a different God, then (3) cannot be true. If the Father is a God, and the Son is the same God, then (1) cannot be true. So necessarily, if (2) is true, it cannot be that both (1) and (3) are true. Thus (1) - (3) are jointly inconsistent (in other words, cannot all be true together).

II

Some defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity would respond to the above argument by denying that ' x and y are the same K ' 'splits up' into ' x and y are K s, and x and y are the same', and denying that ' x and y are different K s' 'splits up' into ' x and y are K s, and x and y are different'.² If they are right, that would certainly block the argument for the inconsistency of the doctrine of the Trinity sketched above. If the relation, *is a different person from*, cannot be 'factored' into something one of whose factors is *is different from (is not the same as)*, and the relation, *is the same God as*, cannot be factored into something one of whose factors is *is the same as*, there is no longer any obvious reason to think that it is contradictory to suppose that the Father stands in the different-person-from relation to the Son, whilst standing in the same-God-as relation to the Son.

I think this sort of defence of the consistency of the doctrine of the Trinity has at least two drawbacks. First, there is something at least initially intuitive about the 'factorability' thesis, and the *onus probandi* (the burden of proof) is accordingly on

those who deny it to explain why it is not true. (In fairness to those who deny it, they have attempted to do so; for reasons of space, I cannot go into why I judge their attempts unsuccessful). Second, there are compelling arguments to the effect that different *Ks* cannot be the same *K** which do not make explicit appeal to the factorability thesis. One (well-known) argument of this type relies on a *lemma* - an intermediate conclusion argued for on the way to arguing for the ultimate conclusion of the argument.³ The lemma is:

(L) (For any kind *K*) If *x* is the same *K* as *y*, then *x* and *y* are indiscernible (have exactly the same properties).

Why believe (L)? Well, suppose that *x* has a certain property, and *y* does not have a certain property, and *x* and *y* are the same *K*. Then one and the same *K* has the first property, and doesn't have the second property. For example, suppose that Hesperus is the same planet as Phosphorus, and Hesperus has the property of being hotter than the Earth, and Phosphorus does not have the property of being hotter than the Sun. In that case, one and the same planet has the property of being hotter than the earth, and lacks the property of being hotter than the Sun.

Now suppose that *x* were the same *K* as *y*, and *x* and *y* were discernible with respect to some property *P*. That is, suppose that *x* were the same *K* as *y*, and *x* had the property *P*, and *y* lacked it. It would follow that one and the same *K* both had and did not have the property *P*. But one and the same *K* cannot both have and not have one and the same property. If there were a counterexample to (L), one and the same *K* would both have and not have one and the same property. But that is a contradiction, and impossible; so there cannot be a counterexample to (L).

Now suppose it were true that *x* and *y* were the same *K*. Could it also be true that *x* and *y* were different *K*s*? Well, by our lemma (L), if *x* and *y* are the same *K*, then *x* and *y* are indiscernible. If however, *x* and *y* were different *K*s*, *x* and *y* would have to be discernible.

Why? Because if *x* and *y* were different *K*s*, they would have to be discernible with respect to the property of *being the same K* as y*. (If *x* is a different *K** from *y*, then *x* is not *the same K** as *y*. Also, if *x* is a different *K** from *y*, then *y*, like *x*, is a *K**, and *y* surely is the same *K** as *y* (since anything that is a *K** is the same *K** as itself). So if *x* and *y* were different *K*s*, they would have to be discernible with respect to at least one property (to wit, *being the same K* as y*.) But, by (L), if *x* and *y* were the same *Ks*, they would have to be indiscernible with respect to all properties. From this it follows that if *x* and *y* are the same *K*, they can't be different *K*s*. If *x* and *y* cannot be different *K*s* without being discernible with respect to some property, and *x* and *y* cannot be the same *K* without being indiscernible with respect to all properties, then *x* and *y* cannot be the same *K* and different *K*s*.

If all of this seems abstract, it may help to apply it to the theological case under consideration. Suppose that the Father and the Son are one and the same God. It follows, by (L), that the Father and the Son are indiscernible with respect to all properties. If, however, the Father and the Son are different persons, then they are discernible with respect to at least one property - namely, *being the same person as the Father*. (If the Father and the Son are different persons, then the Father is a

person, and the Father is the same person as the Father. But if the Father and the Son are different persons, then the Son is not the same person as the Father. So if the Father and the Son are different persons, then the Father and the Son are discernible with respect to *being the same person as the Father.*)

So it doesn't look as though we can defend the consistency of the doctrine of the Trinity by saying that (a) the Father stands in the same-God-as relation to the Son, and (b) stands in the different-person-from relation to the Son. Given (the apparently unimpeachable) (L), (a) implies that the Father and the Son have exactly the same properties, while (b) implies that the Father and the Son don't have exactly the same properties.

III

If Hesperus is Phosphorus, then Hesperus is the same planet as Phosphorus. If Albion is England, then Albion is the same country as England. On the basis of examples like these, it is tempting to conclude that, where t and t' are any terms,

If t is t' , then t is the same something as t' .

i.e.

If t is t' , then for some kind of thing K , t is the same K as t' .

But consider statements such as:

This statue is marble.

and

This penny is copper.

Assuming that this statue is marble, is the statue the same something as marble? It seems not. Why not? Well, a statue is a thing of a certain kind, and marble is a stuff of a certain kind. Since a statue is a thing of a certain (material) kind, a statue has a particular size, a particular shape, and so on. Since marble is a stuff of a certain kind, rather than a thing of a certain kind, marble does not have any particular size or shape. (The question, 'How large is that statue?' makes perfect sense; the question, 'How large is marble?' does not. Things *made of* marble have a particular size and shape; but marble itself does not).

Now suppose that for some kind K , this statue were the same K as marble. As we saw in the last section, if Hesperus and Phosphorus are the same planet, then one and the same planet has all the properties that Hesperus has, and lacks all the properties that Phosphorus lacks. In just the same way, if for some kind K , this statue is the same K as marble, then one and the same K has all the properties that this statue has, and lacks all the properties that marble lacks. So if for some kind K , this statue is the same K as marble, then one and the same K both has a particular size (since every statue has some particular size), and lacks that particular size (since marble is not the kind of entity that has any particular size). This is a contradiction. Since a contradiction

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follows from the supposition that this statue is the same *K* as marble, we may conclude that the statue isn't the same *K* as marble. This statue is marble, but it isn't 'the same anything' as marble.

How can this be? If *x* is not the same anything as *y*, how can *x* be *y*? Well, although a thing cannot be a (kind of) stuff, a thing can be *made of* a kind a stuff. A statue cannot be the kind of stuff, marble, but a statue can be made of the kind of stuff that is marble. A penny cannot be the metallic stuff (the metal) copper, but it can be made of the metal copper. And, it seems, a sentence such as

This penny is copper.

or

This statue is marble.

can be understood (indeed, is naturally understood) as equivalent to:

This penny is (made of) (the metal) copper.

or

This statue is (made of) (the stuff) marble.

Here is a slightly different case, not involving things, in which it can be true that *t* is *t'*, even though *t* is not the same anything as *t'*: graphite is carbon. But is graphite the same anything as carbon? I doubt it. Carbon is an element, but graphite is not (there is no such element as graphite). Also, suppose that graphite were the same element as carbon. It would then likewise be true that diamond is the same element as carbon. Now if *x* is the same *K* as *v*, and *y* is the same *K* as *w*, and if *x* stands in a certain relation to *y*, then *v* stands in that same relation to *w*.

So if graphite is the same element as carbon, and diamond is the same element as carbon, then: if graphite is softer than diamond, then carbon is softer than carbon. But graphite is softer than diamond, and carbon is not softer than carbon (since nothing is softer than itself). From this we may conclude that neither graphite nor diamond is the same element as carbon. And if graphite is not the same element as carbon, then graphite and carbon are discernible, since carbon certainly is the same element as carbon; whence (by (L)) we may conclude that graphite isn't the same anything as carbon (isn't the same *K* as carbon, for any *K*).

Though graphite (or diamond) is not the same element as carbon, graphite (like diamond) is what chemists call an *allotrope* of carbon. And a sentence such as:

Graphite is carbon.

or

Diamond is carbon.

can be understood (and is naturally understood) as equivalent to Graphite is (an allotrope of) carbon.

or

Diamond is (an allotrope of) carbon.

Once we see that '*t* is *t*' has a reading on which it is equivalent to '*t* is (made of) (the stuff) *t*', we can see that there is no problem about the consistency of the following triad:

(4) This penny, that penny, and that other penny are three different pennies.

(5) This penny is copper, that penny is copper, and that other penny is copper.

(6) There is just one copper.

(We take (5) to be equivalent to 'This penny is (made of) (the element) copper, and that penny is (made of) (the element) copper, and that other penny is (made of) (the element) copper' and we take (6) to be equivalent to 'There is just one (element) copper.') There is no reason that three different things can't all 'be' one and the same (kind of) stuff, if 'be' means 'be made of'.

Similarly, there is no problem about the consistency of this triad:

(7) Graphite and Diamond are different kinds of stuff.

(8) Graphite is carbon, and Diamond is carbon.

(9) There is just one carbon.

((7) is true because Graphite and Diamond are different allotropes, and allotropes are kinds of stuff; we take (8) to be equivalent to 'Graphite is (an allotrope of) (the element) carbon, and Diamond is (an allotrope of) (the element) carbon, and (9) to be equivalent to 'There is just one (element) copper'.) Again, there is no reason that three different (allotropic) stuffs cannot be the same (elementary) stuff, if 'be' means 'be an allotrope of'.

To return to the doctrine of the Trinity: that doctrine is traditionally understood as involving the claim that in God there is a unity of substance (or essence or nature), and a trinity of persons. Thus according to the *Quicumque Vult*, 'the Catholic Faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.' There are three divine persons, but only one divine nature or essence or substance, just as there is only one God. Thus the Father and the Son are 'one in nature' or 'one in substance' ('consubstantial').

Suppose that there are three divine persons of one and the same divine essence or nature or substance. Suppose further that the divine nature or essence or substance just is God.

(That God just is His nature or essence was a supposition made by almost all

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mediaeval philosophical theologians: that supposition is reflected in the fact that, although 'man' and 'humanity' are not synonyms, 'God' and '(the) Deity' *are* usually understood as synonyms).

In that case, it seems it could be true that:

- (1) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three different persons.
- (2) The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.
- (3) There is just one God.

- as long as (2) is understood as equivalent to:

(2*) The Father is (a person of) (the nature or substance) God, The Son is (a person of) (the nature or substance) God, and the Holy Spirit is (a person of) (the nature or substance) God. and (3) is understood as equivalent to:

(3*) There is just one (nature or substance) God.

Just as three different statues could all be (statues of) the same (kind of) stuff - marble, and two different allotropes could both be (allotropes) of the same element - carbon, so (it seems) three different divine persons could all be (persons of) the same nature or substance - God.

To forestall a possible misunderstanding: the point here is not that God is a kind of (material) stuff, or an element (any more than the divine persons are material things or allotropes of (material) stuffs). It is instead that there is no evident inconsistency in supposing that the Father and the Son are different, but the God the Father is and the God the Son is are the same God, as long as 'the God the Father is' and 'the God the Son is' are understood as equivalent respectively to 'the substance God that the Father is a person of', and 'the substance God that the Son is a person of' (Compare: this penny and that penny are different, but the kind of stuff this penny is (made of) and the kind of stuff that penny is (made of) are the same kind of stuff).

We can now see where the argument for the inconsistency of the doctrine of the Trinity sketched in section III breaks down. If 'The Father is God' is equivalent to 'The Father is a person of the substance God', we cannot move from

(i) The Father is God, and the Son is too.

to

(ii) The Father and the Son are the same God.

and thence to

(iii) The Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Father is the same as the Son.

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and

(iv) The Father is not a different person from the Son.

Arguing that way will be no better than moving from:

(i') Graphite is carbon, and Diamond is too.

to

(ii') Graphite and Diamond are the same element--carbon. and thence to

(iii') Graphite is carbon, and Diamond is carbon, and Graphite is the same as Diamond.

and

(iv') Graphite is not a different allotrope from Diamond.

This last argument is a bad one, because if we understand *Graphite and Diamond are the same same element - carbon* as equivalent to *Graphite is Carbon, and Diamond is too*, where 'is' means 'is an allotrope of the element', we may not move from *Graphite and Diamond are the same element - carbon* to *Graphite and Diamond are the element carbon, and Graphite and Diamond are the same*. In just the same way, if we understand *The Father and the Son are the same God* as equivalent to *The Father is God, and the Son is too*, where 'is' means 'is a person of the substance', we cannot move from *The Father and the Son are the same God* to *The Father and the Son are Gods, and the Father and the Son are the same*.⁴

IV

This is, I think, a promising way of meeting one sort of challenge to the consistency of the doctrine of the Trinity. But other worries might be raised, one of which I shall set out briefly.

Consider properties such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and so on (which I shall call *omni-properties*). If there are three divine persons and one God, it seems, there are four possibilities:

(a) The omni-properties are properties of neither the divine persons nor God.

(b) The omni-properties are properties of (some or all of) the divine persons, but are not properties of God.

(c) The omni-properties are properties of God, but are not properties of (some or all of) the divine persons.

(d) The omni-properties are properties of both the divine persons and God.

I take it that any orthodox account of the Trinity will rule out (a).

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There are at least two difficulties about endorsing (b). First, if we deny that God has the property of being omnipotent, it sounds as though we are denying that God is omnipotent. (How can we (truly) speak of 'God Almighty', and if God doesn't actually have the property of almightiness (that is, omnipotence)?)

Second, if we say that each one of three different divine persons has all the omni-properties, there is a question about whether we are preserving the spirit as well as the letter of monotheism. Someone might well offer 'omnipotent, omniscient, being' as a definition of 'God'. So, we could ask, if there really are three different omnipotent, omniscient beings, why aren't there three Gods? Moreover (b) implies that the being that we are calling 'God' lacks the omni-properties. If the divine persons have the omni-properties, and the thing we are calling 'God' lacks them, why does the thing we are calling 'God' deserve that name better than the things we are calling 'divine persons'?

Suppose on the other hand, we accept (c). We now have no problem about how we can speak of, say, God almighty, since, if (c) is true, God has the property of almightiness or omnipotence. But accepting (c) raises new difficulties.

First, it seems that nothing could be omnipotent, omniscient, and the like, unless it is a person. Now if God is a person, is He the same person as the Father, and the same person as the Son, and the same person as the Holy Spirit? No, because if x is the same person as y and x is the same person as z , then y is the same person as z . As an instance of this general principle, if God is the same person as the Father, and God is the same person as the Son, then the Father is the same person as the Son. But the Father is not the same person as the Son, since the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three different persons (cf. (1)). So if God is a person, is He the same person as the Father, and a different person from the Son? Surely, the doctrine of the Trinity rules out that God is the same person as *this* person of the Trinity, but a different person from *that* person of the Trinity.

If, however, God is a person, but He's not the same person as all the persons of the Trinity, and He's not the same person as some but not all the persons of the Trinity, then God must be a different person from all three divine persons. So now it looks as though in the Godhead there are *four* different divine persons rather than three, which is surely contrary to the doctrine of the Trinity.

If we endorse (d), we face the same question about why there aren't four persons in the Godhead. There is also a question about why we haven't in effect got quadritheism. If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and God, are all persons with a full complement of omni-properties, why aren't there four Gods?

V The first challenge to the consistency of the doctrine we considered had this form: for any kinds K , K^* , it is always inconsistent to suppose that different K s are the same K^* . Since the doctrine of the Trinity implies that different divine persons are the same God, it is inconsistent. The second challenge has this

form: even granting that - given the right sort of gloss of 'be' - different *Ks* can be one and the same *K**, there is still no way of 'parcelling out' the omni-properties to the divine persons and to God in such a way that the doctrine of the Trinity comes out true.

The second challenge seems to me more pressing than the first. To meet it, one would have to show either that (a) - (d) do not exhaust the possibilities, or explain why a defender of the doctrine of the Trinity can after all (consistently) embrace one of (a) - (d). This is no easy task, and I shall not undertake it here.

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¹ See for example J. Perry, 'The Same *F*', *Philosophical Review* 78 (1970), 181-201.

² Notably Peter Geach, 'Identity', in *Logic Matters*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

³ See D. Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 18 - 23, and J. Perry, 'The Same *F*'.

⁴ The three-pennies-and-one-copper example was suggested to me by a similar one in Augustine's *De Trinitate* 7, 6; for the graphite-diamond-carbon example, I am indebted to Kevin Suharnic.