

RELATIVE IDENTITY, MATERIAL CONSTITUTION,
AND THE PROBLEM OF THE TRINITY

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On Contradictory Doctrines

The philosopher or theologian concerned with maintaining logical coherence faces a difficult task in formulating the doctrine of the Trinity from the onset of his or her project, namely, how to avoid contradiction while asserting the following seven propositions representative of Christian orthodoxy:

- (1) The Father is God.
- (2) The Son is God.
- (3) The Holy Spirit is God
- (4) The Father is not the Son.
- (5) The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
- (6) The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
- (7) There is exactly one God.

The conjunction of propositions (1), (2), (3), and (7) entails a contradiction when read in the most natural and straightforward way, and the denial of any of the propositions entails a departure from orthodoxy.

Three major solutions have been put forward as ways to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity while maintaining logical coherence, creedal orthodoxy, and Biblical faithfulness: Latin Trinitarianism,¹ Social Trinitarianism,² and Relative Identity.³ Each of these options been

¹ See, for example the following: Brian Leftow, "Anti Social Trinitarianism," in *Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203-249; Brian Leftow, "A Latin Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (2004), 304-333; Trenton Merricks, "Split Brains and the Godhead," in *Knowledge and Reality: Essays in Honour of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Thomas M. Crisp, Matthew Davidson, and David Vander Laan (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

² See, for example, the following: Timothy Bartel, "The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian," *Religious Studies* 24 (1988), 129-155; Peter Forrest, "Divine Fission: A New Way of Moderating Social Trinitarianism," *Religious Studies* 34 (1998), 281-297; Stephen C. Layman, "Tritheism and the Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (1988), 291-298; Cornelius Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21-47; Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (New York: Oxford University Press,

heavily discussed and debated, and no definitive agreement has yet been reached in the literature. What does seem clear from the discussion, however, is that the key to the debate lies in one's interpretation and understanding of the use of "is" in propositions (1), (2), and (3) over and against the use of "is" in propositions (4), (5), and (6). One variety of Social Trinitarianism, for example, has taken propositions (1), (2), and (3) to be uses of the "is of predication" and propositions (4), (5), and (6) to be uses of the "is of identity," such that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not each instances of the divine nature but rather parts of the Trinity which is the sole instance of the divine nature.⁴

The other option is elaborated by those in favor of some sort of Relative Identity, which argues that propositions (1), (2), and (3) are incomplete statements and must be supplemented by certain qualifying sortal statements. This paper will examine this strategy—often neglected as a solution to the Trinitarian dilemma—by evaluating several recent proposals of Relative Identity. Moreover, Material Constitution, which has been called "a supplemental story about the metaphysics of [Relative Identity] relations," will be discussed insofar as it relates to the doctrine of the Trinity and "assists" Relative Identity.⁵ It will be argued that neither Relative Identity nor Material Constitution can survive the robust metaphysics necessary for the doctrine of the

1994), 170-191; C. J. F. Williams, "Neither Confounding the Persons nor Dividing the Substance," in *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne*, ed. Alan Padgett (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 227-243.

³ See, for example, the following: G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 118-20; James Cain, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Logic of Relative Identity," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989), 141-52; Peter Geach, "Identity," *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967): 3-12; A. P. Martinich, "God, Emperor, and Relative Identity," *Franciscan Studies* 39 (1979), 180-91; A. P. Martinich, "Identity and Trinity," *Journal of Religion* 58 (1978), 169-81; Peter van Inwagen, "And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas Morris (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 241-78; Peter van Inwagen, "Three Persons in One Being," in *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 83-97.

⁴ See, for example, J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 575-596, and Keith E. Yandell, "The Most Brutal And Inexcusable Error In Counting?: Trinity And Consistency," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), 201-217.

⁵ Michael C. Rea, "Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Philosophia Christi* 5, no. 2 (2003), 433 note 5.

Trinity, and, consequently, another strategy must be taken. Modestly, this paper intends to reiterate the common dismissals of Relative Identity and to keep the discussion among philosophical theologians moving in a favorable direction in the search for a solution that renders the doctrine of the Trinity non-contradictory.

On Identity and Emperors

Peter T. Geach has famously argued that absolute identity is incomplete: “When one says ‘ x is identical with y ,’ this, I hold, is an incomplete expression; it is short for ‘ x is the same A as y .’”⁶ Absolute identity, as it is traditionally understood, then, only provides a partial qualification of the relations between two objects; more information is needed. This understanding of identity, he claims, can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas.⁷ Geach’s account of identity, though not the only one available, serves as a representative for the majority of attempts to relativize identity.⁸

Michael Rea has rightly identified the following two theses as Geach’s classical account of Relative Identity:

(R1) Statements of the form ‘ $x = y$ ’ are incomplete and therefore ill-formed. A proper identity statement has the form ‘ x is the same F as y .’

(R2) States of affairs of the following sort are possible: x is an F , y is an F , x is a G , y is a G , x is the same F as y , but x is not the same G as y .⁹

In other words, an object can be such that it is the same as another object in one respect but different in other respects. For example, the Relative Identity theorist would want to say that x

⁶ Peter T. Geach, “Identity,” 3.

⁷ Anscombe and Geach, *Three Philosophers*, 118. Additionally, Richard Cartwright claims to see relative identity in the writings of Anselm and in the Eleventh Council of Toledo. See, for example, Richard Cartwright, “On the Logical Problem of the Trinity” in *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 193.

⁸ See, for example, Eddy Zemach, “In Defense of Relative Identity,” *Philosophical Studies* 26 (1974), 207-218; Leslie Stevenson, “Relative Identity and Leibniz’s Law,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1972), 155-158; and Nicholas Griffin, *Relative Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

⁹ Rea, “Relative Identity,” 434.

could be said to be the same color as y but not the same *Car* as y . It is possible that this type of account will work for properties—for one would be hard pressed to find an Absolute Identity theorist who would claim two different cars cannot be the same color—but it does not appear promising that Relative Identity can be applied to what it is actually seeking to relativize, namely, identity. Consider an example: it is possible for x and y to be the same *Color* but not the same *Car*, but such a statement cannot be reversed. If x and y are the same *Car*, then it necessarily follows that they will be the same *Color* (it also follows that they will have all properties in common and have no different properties). Such a thesis could be formulated as follows:

(8) For any object x , if x is said to be identical with y , then it necessarily follows that x and y possess identical properties such that for every property p possessed by x , if y is identical to x , then there is no property x has that y does not also have.

(9) For any property p , it is possible for x to have p and for y to have p without x and y being identical.

If Relative Identity only wished to affirm (8) and (9), it is doubtful that proponents of Absolute Identity would have much with which to disagree, for identity and property are consistently (or at least should be) understood differently. However, the Relative Identity theorist wishes to affirm more.

Consider, for example, A. P. Martinich who, following Geach, has proposed a solution to the problem of the Trinity by asserting that “identity is not absolute, but relative.”¹⁰ He formulates his theory by considering two Roman emperors, Diocletian and Maximian, who ruled

¹⁰ Martinich, “Identity and Trinity,” 175.

the Roman empire at the same time.¹¹ One could, on this account, gain a contradiction that parallels the case of the Trinity:

(10) Diocletian is the emperor of Rome.

(11) Maximian is the emperor of Rome.

(12) Diocletian is not Maximian.

This case seems, at first glance, to provide the same sort of dilemma gained by the conjunction of propositions (1), (2), and (4). Given Relative Identity, Diocletian and Maximian are the same in respect to emperor:

(13) Diocletian is the same emperor as Maximian.

But they are different in respect to person:

(14) Diocletian is not the same person as Maximian.

In the same way, Relative Identity theorists hope to say that persons of the Trinity are the same in respect to God but different in respect to person:

(15) The Father is the same God as the Son.

(16) The Father is not the same person as the Son.

The conjunction of (10), (11), and (12) avoids contradiction under Relative Identity, but it entails a contradiction if the “is” is understood as the “is of identity”—that is, if identity is absolute. In other words, given the indiscernibility of identicals (a central thesis of Absolute Identity), if Diocletian is absolutely identical with the emperor of Rome, and if Maximian is absolutely identical with the emperor of Rome, then it necessarily follows, given transitivity, that Diocletian and Maximian are absolutely identical. This is precisely what Relative Identity wishes to dismiss. Therefore, argues Martinich, more information is needed to supplement any

¹¹ Martinich, “God, Emperor, and Relative Identity,” 186-190.

statement that asserts “ x is identical with y .”¹² Instead, they say, they are the same emperor but different persons (or, in the case of the Trinity, the same God but different persons). If identity is relative it would appear that Martinich has provided a cogent solution to the logical problem of the Trinity.

In response, however, it is likely that the proponent of Absolute Identity would state (10), (11), and (12) differently:

(10*) Diocletian possesses all the properties necessary and sufficient for being emperor of Rome (Pe) and as such obtains emperorship.

(11*) Maximian possesses all the properties necessary and sufficient for being emperor of Rome (Pe) and as such obtains emperorship.

(12*) Diocletian possess the properties necessary for emperorship (Pe) and Maximian possesses all the properties necessary for emperorship (Pe).

However, given (9),

(17) It is possible for Diocletian to possess Pe and for Maximian to possess Pe without being identical, for Diocletian and Maximian are distinct property bearers.

More specifically, there are two distinct individuals, each having the property of occupying a specific office. This seems to be the most straightforward reading of the case of the emperors. It appears that there is no way to posit that Maximian and Diocletian are the same emperor but distinct individuals, as Relative Identity seeks to assert. To further illustrate this phenomenon, imagine a parallel case:

(18) John is senator.

(19) Jim is senator.

(20) John is not the same person as Jim.

¹² Ibid.

Obviously, there is no logical contradiction in this case, for there is no reason to assume that there is only one senator, John and Jim when in fact there are two senators, John and Jim. Such is the case for Martinich's emperors; there is nothing essential to being emperor that rules out the possibility of more than one person occupying the role. For example, it would be better for Martinich to assert the propositions in the following manner:

(21) Diocletian is *an* emperor of Rome.

(22) Maximian is *an* emperor of Rome.

(23) Diocletian and Maximian are not the same emperor of Rome.

Thus, this case cannot be parallel to the Trinity, for orthodox Trinitarian theology includes proposition (7): "There is only one God." Without this qualification, Martinich's example would be expressed something like the following:

(22) The Father is *a* God.

(23) The Son is *a* God.

(24) There Father and the Son are not the *same* God.

However, this is not orthodox Trinitarian theology, nor is it what the Relative Identity theorist wishes to express. Under the assumption of Relative Identity, "the divine Persons [of the Trinity] stand in various relativized relations of sameness and distinctness. They are, for example, the same God as one another, but they are not the same Person. They are...God-identical but Person-distinct."¹³

Suppose that Martinich had added the following proposition:

(25) There is only one emperor of Rome.

This proposition would have rendered the case parallel to the problem of the Trinity: How exactly can there be one emperor and two persons? Or, how can there be three persons who are

¹³ Rea, "Relative Identity," 432.

one God? Trinitarian theology—at least according to those Trinitarians who take (1), (2), and (3) to be expressing the “is of identity”—is left with this problem.

It is better understood that Maximian and Diocletian each have all the properties necessary and sufficient for being emperor. For example, they both have been elected by the people, possess the power to create laws, to enforce taxes, to control the military, and other such properties deemed necessary and sufficient for being an emperor. They are different property bearers who possess specific, unique instances of “emperorship properties.” For instance, perhaps Maximian was voted into office on July 14, and perhaps Diocletian was voted into office on August 22. Both possess the property of “being voted into office by the people,” but it is not the same “being voted into office by the people” possessed by both emperors; there is no universal “being voted into office by the people” of which both emperors partake. Moreover, being emperor is not an essential property of either Maximian or Diocletian, for there exists a possible world in which they could not be the emperors of Rome.

It seems, then, that the best way to read the Roman emperor case is to understand (10) and (11) as being instances of the “is of predication,” such that being emperor is a nonessential property or state that can at some time be said to be possessed by Maximian and Diocletian. Such an understanding seems to be a possible way of reading (1), (2), and (3) by affirming Absolute Identity and maintaining logical coherence.

Consider an additional reason why propositions (1), (2), and (3) should not be taken to be expressing the “is of identity.” It is understood that “being triune” is essential to the nature of God; God could not, in any possible world, exist without being triune. The implications of this understanding have ramifications for one’s understanding of (1), (2), and (3). If each person of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—are considered to be individually

(absolutely) identical to God, it follows that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each must be triune.¹⁴ Such an understanding cannot be considered orthodox, for on such an account three triune beings would exist at the same time. For this reason, it is best to seek an alternative—and more probable—understanding of (1), (2), and (3).

It seems that one wishing to solve the problem of the Trinity by means of relative identity is left with three options. He or she can say that the Trinitarian dilemma is avoided only *if* identity is relative; Geach, and Martinich have shown that *if* Relative Identity is true, then the doctrine of the Trinity can be said to be logically coherent.¹⁵ This sort of solution is also posited by Peter van Inwagen who has said, “The logic of identity I shall propose turns on the idea that there is not one relation of identity but many.”¹⁶ In other words, van Inwagen is non-committal on the theory but attempts to use it for his own benefit, much like a compatibilist Calvinist who conveniently uses Plantinga’s free will defense as a solution to the problem of evil. However, identity has been proven to be absolute, and there is no logically consistent way to show that objects stand in identity relations other than absolute relations. In his *Sameness and Substance Renewed*, David Wiggins has gone to great lengths to show that identity is, in fact, absolute, and he has outlined some of the major consequences of foregoing Leibniz’s Law for some other theory of identity.¹⁷ A second option, recognized by Trenton Merricks, is that one could assert that “the logic of absolute identity—which is good enough for everyday purposes—‘breaks down at the quantum level’ or ‘breaks down when it comes to the very nature of God.’”¹⁸ If this is the case, the one desiring to hold on to Relative Identity must at least admit that *regularly*

¹⁴ Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 586-596.

¹⁵ Rea, “Relative Identity,” 440 and Keith E. Yandell, “How Many Times Does Three Go Into One?” unpublished class handout.

¹⁶ Peter van Inwagen, “Three Persons in One Being,” 83-97.

¹⁷ David Wiggins, *Substance and Sameness Renewed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21-54.

¹⁸ Trenton Merricks, “Split Brains and the Godhead.”

identity is absolute. This would significantly weaken his or her case because the Trinity would be made, in a way, theory dependent. Finally, one could endorse a form of relative identity supplemented by a metaphysical story that illuminates the character of relations of relativity. Rea and Brower take this final option, to which we now turn.

On Lumps and Statues

Is there any way to supplement Relative Identity with a metaphysical backbone capable of saving the theory from defeat? Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea answer this question in the affirmative. In their “Material Constitution and the Trinity,” Rea and Brower put forth the idea that the Aristotelian notion of numerical sameness without identity can explain the problem of material constitution and serve as a supplemental story of the physics behind relative identity relations.¹⁹ In fact, they argue that accidental sameness as a “solution to the problem of material constitution is probably the single most neglected solution to that problem in the contemporary literature.”²⁰ In order to offer a critique of their position, it will be beneficial to outline the basic assumptions behind the idea of numerical sameness without identity.

Brower and Rea notice that “accidental sameness, according to Aristotle, is just the relation that obtains between an accidental unity and its parent substance.”²¹ This concept is best understood with an example. Consider Socrates, who has all the essential properties necessary and sufficient for personhood and for, specifically, being Socrates. If he lost any of these necessary properties, he would fail to continue being Socrates. However, numerical sameness without identity asserts that when Socrates performs a specific action, such as being seated in a chair, Socrates and “Seated-Socrates [are] in ‘accidental unity’—a unified thing that exists only

¹⁹ Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, “Material Constitution and the Trinity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 1, 58-59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 60

by virtue of the instantiation of an accidental (non-essential) property (like seatedness) by a substance (like Socrates).”²² In other words, “seated-Socrates” must be considered distinct from Socrates, for the persistence conditions of each are not identical. For example, when Socrates leaves his reading chair, “seated-Socrates” ceases to exist while Socrates continues in existence. These type of objects, according to Rea and Brower, can be “very plausibly characterized as hylomorphic compounds whose matter is a *familiar material object* and whose form is an accidental property...there are never two material objects occupying precisely the same place at the same time...they are one in number but not one in being.”²³

Consider further a lump of bronze, composed of 5,000 “units” of bronze. This lump has been removed from a pot of molten bronze and has been allowed to cool, creating a seemingly shapeless lump of bronze (composed of 5,000 “units” of bronze). The bronze lump is subsequently re-melted in order to cast a statue in the likeness of the Greek goddess Athena. The lump is formed into a miniature likeness of the goddess and is still composed of the exact 5,000 “units” of bronze that composed the shapeless lump. However, according to Rea and Brower, the bronze lump in the shape of a statue (recognized as Athena) must be considered as an additional substance than the lump of bronze that composes the statue because its essential properties are supposedly different. For example, when the lump of bronze in the shape of the statue (named Athena) is re-melted, Athena goes out of existence while the lump of bronze continues to exist (keep in mind that it still is composed of the same 5,000 “units” of bronze). This seems deeply counter-intuitive and implausible, but more than that, it is outright false. No “new” object comes into existence, for a statue is nothing more than a lump of bronze molded in a way that resembles a specific likeness—what is commonly referred to as a statue.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 61

If one were to think that Athena were an object in addition to the lump of bronze composed of 5,000 “units” of bronze, what would her essential properties be? Presumably, her essential properties would be identical to those of the lump of bronze composed of 5,000 units of bronze; the 5,000 units are simply shaped differently.²⁴ There is no good reason why one should assume that every time an object changes its state or shape that a new object comes into existence. It is likely, however, that Brower and Rea would disagree with (8) by saying that the lump (*x*) and the statue (*y*) cannot be said to be identical because they do not share all the same properties. Athena, the statue, has the essential property of “being in the shape of Athena.” One could respond to this charge by arguing that the lump and the statue share all essential properties; “being in the shape of Athena” is a non-necessary property that can or cannot be possessed by the lump of bronze.²⁵

Conclusion

It seems that according to Rea and Brower, all one must do to form a coherent doctrine of the Trinity is combine two philosophically controversial, counter-intuitive, false theories. This does not seem to be the best way to pursue a coherent formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Certainly Plantingian and Swinburnian Tritheism fall short of legitimate orthodox monotheism, and more work is to be done. However, Relative Identity does not appear to be the best way forward for the philosophical theologian, for it seems to be a metaphysically incoherent way of expressing what the social Trinitarian is able to assert without the metaphysical baggage.

²⁴ This example has been slightly modified from one provided by Dr. Keith E. Yandell in a personal conversation.

²⁵ For further critique of Rea and Brower’s argument, see William Lane Craig, “Does the Problem of Material Constitution Illuminate the Doctrine of the Trinity?” *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2005), 77-86.

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