Many-One Identity and the Trinity

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The doctrine of the Trinity is, put simply, a conjunction of these three claims: (i) There are three distinct Divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, (ii) each Divine Person is God, and (iii), there is exactly one God. However, if there are three distinct Persons that are each God, we should get the result that there are three Gods. It seems Trinitarian Christians are having trouble counting: they need 3 to equal 1.

But is that such a tall order? Perhaps bizarre mereology can give us a new way to count, to meet these many-one needs. The relevant mereological claim, which has been presented in the literature, is that pluralities are identical to the things that they compose[1]. In this paper, I argue that this claim is not helpful to Trinitarians. In §1 I present and discuss the many-one identity claim, and in §2 I apply the claim to the Doctrine of the Trinity, presenting how it might seem to help the Trinitarian. Then in §3 and §4 I argue that upon closer inspection it proves to not help at all, but instead leaves us with the same options that we began with. In §4 I also explore whether it might help a polytheist, and argue that the only view it assists is one that's entirely unmotivated. I conclude that, while it is an interesting metaphysical thesis, the composition-is-identity claim isn't useful in helping reconcile the claims in the Doctrine of the Trinity.[2]

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[1] That is, if they compose anything.

[2] A quick note on my vocabulary before I begin: In the literature, there are varying accounts of what 'composition' and 'constitution' refer to. I'll follow Lewis (pp. 72-74) and van Inwagen (1994, p. 207) and use the standard account, that for the xs to compose y is for y to be a fusion of the xs, and for the xs to constitute y is for y to be a fusion of the xs and for there to be exactly one of the xs. So constitution is a type of composition.

1. Many-One Identity

Lewis claimed that mereology is ontologically innocent. That is, when we accept (i) the transitivity of parthood, (ii) unrestricted composition and (iii) uniqueness of composition, we will not need to posit any more or less (in number or kind of entities) than what we already do.[3] To support the ontological innocence of (ii), Lewis (following Donald Baxter) puts forth the claim that composition is an identity relation, or at least is analogous to one. In describing the intuitive appeal of such a claim, he says:

> Given a prior commitment to cats, say, a commitment to cat-fusions is not a *further* commitment. The fusion is nothing over and above the cats that compose it. It just *is* them. They just *are* it . . . the cats are the same portion of Reality either way . . . if you draw up an inventory of Reality according to your scheme of things, it would be double counting to list the cats and then also list their fusion.[4]

When people talk about redundancy in a list of one's ontology, they usually mean that something, *x*, supervenes on *y*. But there are different types of supervenience[5], and only the strongest, namely *identity*, will get us genuine redundancy in ontology.

Lewis ultimately rejects the claim that Baxter argues for, which Byeong-Uk Yi states as

- *The Strong Composition Thesis (SC):* "The predicate 'are' used to indicate the composition relation is *literally* another form of the 'is' of identity".[6]

Lewis instead endorses:

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[3] Lewis, p. 74. In responding to this claim, van Inwagen (1994, p. 209) points out that anyone who thinks, e.g., that a statue and the lump that constitutes it are distinct and colocated entities that are composed of the same atoms, will deny that mereology is ontologically innocent - accepting the axioms would require him/her to posit less than he/she otherwise would. However, as van Inwagen acknowledges, this response takes issue with the innocence of axiom (iii); the focus of this paper will be on the innocence of axiom (ii).

[4] Lewis, p. 81.

[5] For instance, in one form it's merely an entailment relation: *x* supervenes on *y* iff whenever *y* exists, *x* exists, and all of *x*'s properties are determined by the properties of *y*.

[6] Yi, p. 145.

- ***The Weak Composition Thesis (WC):*** "The predicate 'are' used to indicate the

  composition relation is only *analogously* another form of the 'is' of identity".[7]

Because Strong Composition really is stronger (it entails Weak Composition minus the

'only' included in the formulation above), it has the best chance of giving us the tools we

need to help the Trinitarian reconcile the claims in the doctrine of the Trinity. (If it isn't

strong enough, we'll be able to conclude that the weaker form can't help us either.)

Therefore, it's the claim I'll focus on in this paper.

What is meant when someone says composition is a form of the identity relation?

It entails that, if composition occurs, many entities can be identical to a single entity;

namely, a plurality is identical to the fusion of its members, and a fusion is identical to

the plurality of its parts.[8] This is one of the reasons that Lewis refuses to accept SC; he

says, "What's true of the many is not exactly what's true of the one. After all they are

many while it is one."[9] To find a way to avoid this seemingly obvious violation of the

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[7] Yi, p. 146. There is an issue of whether Lewis can support his claim that mereology is ontologically innocent while adopting the weaker thesis alone. Wallace thinks Lewis must adopt the stronger thesis to support his claim. She says, "If the parts are not literally identical to the whole, then in committing oneself to the parts, one has not committed oneself to the whole – a further commitment is needed". I see a couple of ways that Lewis could respond to this. He might, for instance, say he's merely asserting that mereology doesn't require us to posit anything the existence of which is not entailed by what we currently posit. Weaker forms of supervenience produce *this* kind of redundancy. But we then lose the intuitive appeal of Lewis's claims – it's not the case that we'll be double counting when we list x and y in our ontology, and also z, whose existence is entailed by, but not identical to, x and y's. Another response is to say that there are different senses of identity that we're concerned with. In the most strict sense, which requires a one-one relation and that the indiscernibility of identicals, a fusion is not identical to the plurality of its parts. But in another sense, which is the sense we should be concerned with when counting things in Reality, they are identical, and it would be redundant to list or count both the fusion and the plurality (Donald Baxter discusses a view like this in "Identity in the Loose and Popular Sense", 1988).

[8] The type of entity that the plurality is identical to will differ depending on what kinds of entities the members of the plurality are. If the plurality has as members only things, it will compose a thing (and, the Strong Composition theorist would claim, will be identical to a thing). If its members are portions of stuff, it will compose a portion of stuff. And if it has members from different ontological categories, it will compose a trans-ontological fusion. In this discussion I'll use thing-talk, for convenience.

[9] Lewis, p. 87. There may be some confusion at this point. Isn't the purpose of endorsing SC that it enables us to say that the parts are identical to the whole? The question is ambiguous. If, when talking about what stands in the composition relation, we are talking about the *plurality* of parts, then of course the SC gives the result that the plurality and what they compose are identical. However, when we say "the

indiscernibility of identicals we can turn to Frege,[10] who presented a notion of relative

counting according to which entities have no cardinality *simpliciter*. Rather, the

cardinality we ascribe to entities is indexed to the concept or sortal we are counting

under. Frege says, "The Illiad, for example, can be thought of as one poem, or as twenty-

four Books, or as some large Number of verses"[11] The Strong Composition theorist will

say that the Illiad is identical to the twenty-four Books, which are identical to the large

number of verses. The poem just is the verses, counted under the concept *poem* rather

than *versus* or *books*. This gives us one way to understand Baxter's statement, "the

whole is the many parts counted as one thing",[12] and gives the Strong Composition

theorist a response to some of Lewis's worries.[13]

2. Application to the Trinitarian Claims

For the Strong Composition thesis to help the Trinitarian, it must help us make sense of

this (from the Athanasian Creed):

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parts are identical to the whole" we may mean that each part in the plurality is such that *it* is identical to the fusion of parts.

Some theorists may believe that composition as identity can *only* obtain when the composite is identical to each of its parts. This seems to be what motivates worries such as this one: "How can one thing be the same as two, neither of which is the same as the first? A cardboard disc is made up of two halves. Obviously the disc is not the same as the first half and not the same as the second." (Chandler, p. 314.) Obviously, it would be bad for the Strong Composition theorist if they claimed that composites are identical to each of their *proper* parts. But they don't claim this, and they don't need to. The implicit premise in Chandler's argument is that if the disc is not identical with each of the parts, it cannot be identical with the plurality of those parts; a similar argument is given by Byeong-Uk Yi (Yi, pp. 141-143). Wallace responds, rightly, by saying that what is true of *x and y* needn't be true of *x* and true of *y* -- what is true of a plurality needn't be true of its parts. And for the indiscernibility of identicals to hold when we assert that the plurality is identical to the fusion of its members, all we need is that the plurality has the same properties as the fusion. We don't need that the fusion has the same properties as each of its parts (and the plurality's members). Thus, I see no reason to endorse Chandler's implicit premise.

[10] Responding by appealing to Fregean counting is advised by Wallace.

[11] Frege, §22, quoted in Wallace, p. 10.

[12] Baxter 1988, p. 579. Though I should point out, Baxter does *not* accept Fregean counting. I'll elaborate on this below.

[13] Not everyone thinks turning to Fregean counting is the best way to respond to this worry. In addition to Baxter, Ted Sider (Forthcoming) offers an alternative: don't deny that everything that's true of the many is true of the one, and vice versa. More on this option below.

> We worship one God in the Trinity, and the Trinity in unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have one divinity, equal glory, and coeternal majesty . . . the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. However there are not three Gods, but one God.[14]

We can extract the three Trinitarian claims, that there are three distinct persons ("one person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit"), one God ("there are not three Gods, but one God"), and that each Divine person is God ("The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God"). Further, the Creed mentions not dividing the substance, suggesting that God shares a single substance with the Persons. This is promising because it means the case has a relevant similarity to cases in which we don't want to double-count. Remembering Lewis's example of the plurality of all cats, we can see that the plurality shares a single substance with the fusion of all cats ("the same portion of Reality"[15]). The plurality of cats compose the fusion, and given SC, the many cats are identical to one fusion. Likewise, the Trinitarian can say that in virtue of sharing a single substance with God, the Persons compose God, and given SC the three Persons are identical to one God.

To cash this out a bit more, we can use Fregean relative counting and say that the three Divine entities are identical to the one, since when counting by Persons we find that we have three (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), and counting by Gods we find only one. Further, we can say that when Christians speak of their Trinitarianism they are counting by Persons, and when they speak of their monotheism they are counting by Gods. There is no contradiction in worshiping three and one, because (to apply Wallace's interpretation of Frege), there is no answer to the question "How many Divine

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[14] Anderson, < http://www.creeds.net/ancient/Quicumque.html >
[15] Lewis, p. 81.

entities are there?" until we specify what concept or sortal we're considering the Divine entities under.

Finally, the identity between the Persons and God will explain why in completely describing the Persons we completely describe God, and vice versa. The many are identical to the one. Thus it appears this strange mereology is a useful tool in reconciling the claims of the Trinity. However, further examination is in order.

3. Strong *Constitution* as Identity

In the application of SC we found it to be necessary that the Persons share a single substance with God. We needed this in order to claim that the three Persons are identical to the one God in virtue of composing God. (It's in virtue of the composition relation that SC gives the result that the Persons and God are identical.) But do we really want to claim that the Persons compose God? As Lewis defines composition, it's simply that *y* has all of the *x*s as parts, and has no part that is disjoint from them.[16] (We could, instead, cash out composition in terms of the *made of* relation instead of the *part of* relation (perhaps because you're sympathetic to Kit Finean worries about contemporary characterizations of parthood), where it needn't be the case that if *x* is made of *y* then *x* = *y*. If you prefer this, please read my usage of '*x* is a part of *y*' as meaning x is some of what y is made of, and '*x* is a proper part of *y*' as meaning *x* is some, but not all, of what *y* is made of.) So in order for the Persons to compose God, they must be parts of God.

Is the composition relation between them one-one or one-many? Anyone who thinks God is a Person should posit a one-one composition relation between a Person and

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[16] Lewis, p. 73.

God. So what if we claim that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit each stand in such a relation to God?

The relevant composition-as-identity claim would be weaker than the one we discussed above, since we only need the claim that the one-one composition relation (i.e., *constitution*) is a form of the identity relation. Call this claim be *Strong Constitution*.[17] Will it help us? In applying it to the Trinity, we find that if each Person constitutes God, each is identical to God. But if we have three Persons each identical to God, how can we have only one God? This is familiar ground for the Trinitarian, who knows the options:

One can assert that identity can be relative: on this view, we say that the persons are not identical as persons, but are identical as Gods. That is, it would be a mistake to say that there is a relation of identity *simpliciter* between the entities under discussion (the Persons and God). This claim has been widely covered in the literature on the Trinity.[18] And it doesn't depend on bizarre mereological theses, but rather can stand alone in reconciling the claims in the Doctrine.

Another option is to deny the transitivity of identity: it's not always the case that if *x* is identical to *y*, and *y* is identical to *z*, then *x* is identical to *z*. But, like relative identity, this claim doesn't depend on Strong Constitution or Strong Composition. We must look elsewhere if we hope the claims can give us (or at least help support) a *new* response to the problem of the Trinity.

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[17] Mereology seems to suggest that constitution can be identity. Recall Lewis's original motivation for saying that composition is (at least analogous to) identity: he needed this thesis to ensure that mereology is ontologically innocent. And recall also van Inwagen's initial objection, that uniqueness of composition entails that things which stand in the constitution relation, such as the statue and the lump, are identical when they are composed of the same parts.

[18] Among the people who have written about this are James Cain, G. E. M. Anscombe and P.T. Geach, Daniel Howard-Snyder, A. P. Martinich, Michael Rea and Peter van Inwagen. (Citations from Rea, p. 432)

A third option is to bite the bullet and say the Persons are identical. That is, to accept modalism, the claim that the three Divine Persons are really all simply aspects of the same individual. However, past being declared heretical, it seems that someone going this route would need to deny the indiscernibility of identicals.[19] This is acceptable to some: Donald Baxter, for instance, believes that this is the only way to make sense of the thesis that composition is identity. He denies that making counting relative to concepts or sortals under which we are thinking the object(s) is sufficient to account for the different cardinalities that we attribute to the object(s). He says, "Frege's suggestion fails, as mine does not, when whole and parts are homoeomerous, when they fall under the same sortal."[20] Baxter's suggestion, to contrast with Frege's, is that the entities actually have different aspects, and in each aspect they have different properties (among which are some properties involving cardinality). Thus, he says:

> There are things true of an object in an aspect that are neither simply true of the object nor are entailed or explained by the concept used of the object. Someone as Senator might support a bill which she as citizen opposes. It is not simply true of her that she supports the bill. She does and she doesn't. Nor is her support entailed or explained by the fact that she falls under the concept of Senator. Thus talk of aspects is not just talk of individuals or concepts.[21]

When applied to the Trinity, this is modalism with the denial of the indiscernibility of identicals. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are aspects of the same individual, which has

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[19] Even if modalism did not require us to deny the indiscernibility of identicals, it seems that it would be a view that is congenial to the Strong Composition (and the Strong Constitution) theorist. This is because the Strong Constitution and Strong Composition theorists puts a lot of effort in trying to counteract assumptions that an entity in one aspect (or thought or counted under one concept) is not identical to that very entity when in another aspect (or thought or counted under another concept). For instance, the modalist asserts that the Father is just God in the aspect of (or when considered as) creator of the world, the Son is just God in the aspect of (or when considered as) the Word made incarnate, etc. This is much like thinking, going back to Frege, that the Illiad is one poem in the aspect of (or when counted under the concept of) *literary work*, twenty-four books in the aspect of (or when thought under the concept) *homework assignments*, etc.

[20] Baxter, Forthcoming, p. 9.

[21] Baxter, Forthcoming, p. 11.

different properties in each aspect. In this way, Baxter asserts, we can discern between the identical. However, modalism and the denial of the indiscernibility of identicals are well-known responses to the problem of the Trinity, which don't depend on theses about constitution. Strong Constitution has given us nothing new.[22]

So, to take inventory: we've found that Strong Composition can only help the Trinitarian if we posit a relation of composition between the Persons and God. If we think the Persons are *each* identical to God, we can assert a weaker thesis than Strong Composition, that of Strong *Constitution*. Unfortunately, this thesis is unhelpful in reconciling the claims of the Doctrine: to make the description of the Trinity work with constitution as identity, we are required to make further claims any of which would, if adequately supported, reconcile the Trinitarian claims on its own, without any need for the controversial mereological theses examined in this paper.

4. Strong *Composition* as Identity

So the only way for the Strong Composition thesis to be of any use to us in reconciling the Trinitarian claims is if the Persons stand in a many-one composition relation to God.[23] But now it seems we are simply left with a form of Social Trinitarianism. Michael Rea describes Social Trinitarianism as maintaining that "the

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[22] One might here pause and wonder if we really have modalism after all. Might discernibility be enough for distinctness (in a sense) of the persons? Suppose that we recognise, as David Brown would like us to, that at the time the Athanasian Creed was written, 'Person' did not mean what we usually think of as a person today, a "self-reflective and self-determining center of consciousness" (Brown, p. 526), but instead only meant 'the bearer of a referent.' Would this help? It seems not; the point of Baxter's claims is that the entities under discussion *really are* identical, even though they have different properties. Any inclination we have to see them as distinct is simply due to our (purportedly misguided) tendency to associate discernibility with (and perhaps even define it in terms of) non-identity. Modalism only requires that the Persons are identical; if there is only one referent, it does not matter that there are different senses or modes (via the individual's different aspects) of reference.

[23] While the view that the Persons are composed of many Gods exists in logical space, I'll ignore it here and assume the relation holds in the reverse direction.

relation between God and [each of] the Persons is not any sort of identity or sameness

relation at all. Rather, it's something like parthood (God is a composite being whose

parts are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) or membership (God is a community whose

members are the Divine Persons)."[24] But, once again, this is a claim that's sufficient for

responding to the trouble with the Trinity, and which doesn't depend on Strong

Composition.

Does SC do anything for us? Perhaps. Social Trinitarians say there is one God,

the community or fusion (or something relevantly similar) of the Persons. But we still

want to preserve as much as possible the claim that each Person is God. Monotheists

cannot endorse both claims without appealing to one of the other responses to the

problem of the trinity (relative identity, modalism, etc.). But a polytheist could endorse

both claims, by positing one God for each Person, and one for the community or fusion of

them.[25] Maybe SC can help this theorist reduce the number of Gods posited: with SC,

we could claim there are three Gods when counting by Persons, and one when counting

by Gods; anything else would be double-counting.[26]

However, Fregean counting won't actually give the above results, since each

Person is a God and the plurality is also identical to God.[27] Recall Baxter's earlier worry

about Frege's method of counting: it only works if the entities you count fall under

different concepts or sortals. Surely, one might say, we have different sortals with the

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[24] Rea, p. 432.

[25] Unless, e.g., one of the Persons really is identical to the community of all of the Persons, somehow . . .

[26] After all, consider an analogous example (presented by Baxter (1988), and discussed further by Wallace (p. 12)): when counting a six-pack of beer, we want to say that there are six beers, one six-pack, etc. But when asked how many things there are *in total*, we should not simply sum these up, on pain of double counting. If we did, we would be counting the same entity under more than one concept or sortal at once.

[27] I have let myself waffle a bit between using the name 'God' and the description 'a God'. However, we know that God is a God, so recognizing this waffling won't help to dispel the problem (which arises from a God being wholly decomposable into some entities each of which is a God).

Trinity – we've referred to them throughout the paper: Gods and Persons. However, because our Trinitarian asserts that each Person is a God and God is composed of the Persons, we have the result that God is composed of Gods. So counting by Gods, we must count the fusion, and the three Gods that it has as proper parts.[28, 29]

What can we do instead? Ted Sider (forthcoming) suggests the SC theorist claim that the cardinality of "an" object is always identical to the cardinality of the set including all the object's parts, on every decomposition. So in the case above, we'd say that there

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[28] All of the Gods mentioned are, after all, numerically distinct; while the fusion may be identical to the plurality of Gods, it is not identical with any one of its proper parts.

[29] These worries aside, there are other problematic consequences of the application of Fregean counting and Strong Composition to the Trinity. For instance, discussing a six-pack of beer, Wallace says: "one six-pack is identical to six beers, but then does this leave us with one thing or six? To plunk down for either six or for one would be an arbitrary choice" (p. 27). But the difference between monotheism and polytheism is *not* something we take to be arbitrary. Wallace says that on Frege's view, there is "no principled way for determining whether one should count by the many or few . . . it is incoherent to give an unqualified answer to: how many?" (p. 28) The result is the same on Baxter's view – it does not make sense to characterise something only in terms of one of its aspects. But monotheists take themselves to be justified in giving an unqualified answer to the question of how many Divine entities there are. So applying Strong Composition to the Trinity requires us to give up traditional monotheism, and accept an altered view which seems to miss the intention of the original. (Interestingly, insofar as we think God does have each of the Persons as proper parts, and insofar as we also think that if Strong Composition were true, it would apply to God as well as to all other composites, these worries about monotheism can be used to argue against Strong Composition.)

A further thought along this same line: at *best*, Strong Composition when applied to the Trinity will give us the result that there is one God (on one way of counting, or in one aspect, supposing we go for *very* fine-grained sortals) which is identical to three Gods (on another way of counting, or in another aspect). But this isn't sufficient to satisfy the claims in the Athanasian Creed, for the Creed claims not only that there is one God, but also *denies* that there are three Gods: "there are not three Gods, but one God". If we take the denial seriously, then there are no three Gods for the one God to be identical to, and our application of the composition thesis is in trouble.

Perhaps one could attempt to respond to this worry by saying something like this: of course it's true that there are not three Gods, but one God, *on one way of counting (or in one aspect of the entity)*. When we index all predications of cardinality to concepts or sortals we're counting under (or aspects in terms of which we're characterising the entity), any time we have a result that an entity *e* has a cardinality of *n* under sortal (or aspect) x, we get the result that it has a cardinality of exactly *n* under *x*, and thus, under *x*, it does not have a cardinality of *n'* (where *n'* is any number distinct from *n*). This response, however, has the downfall that inasmuch as its proponent was committed to the truth of the original claim in the Athanasian creed, they are committed to the truth of this statement about the Trinity as well: there is not exactly one God, but three Gods. The statements are alike in all relevant respects, except for which sortal we are counting the Persons and their fusion under (or what aspect the entities are being characterised in terms of), and so the statements should be equally plausible. However, the result that "there is not exactly one God, but three Gods" expresses something just as true as any statement asserting the existence of only one God, will be an unacceptable consequence to monotheists. (A minor worry: if we take 'God' to refer to the plurality, it doesn't refer to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost, but rather, to the three taken together. This seems contrary to doctrine. However, this is a worry applicable to all forms of Social Trinitarianism which escape polytheism by identifying God with a community or fusion of Persons.)

really are (at least!) four Gods. We preserve the indiscernibility of identicals, with the only cost being that we're forced to characterise things in a way we wouldn't have wanted to initially. But regardless of whether this is a plausible view, it hasn't helped our polytheist social trinitarian: we haven't reduced the number of Gods.

Finally, one can, like Baxter, reject both Fregean counting and the indiscernibility of identicals. This gives us a genuinely new option. Polytheism gives us distinctness of the persons and each of them being a God, and Strong Composition gives us a relation between the Persons and God that explains our Trinitarian leanings, and the denial of the indiscernibility of identicals lets us have a cardinality of Gods that never exceeds 3.

How excited should we be about this new option? I'm not very enthusiastic. First, polytheism requires an outright denial of one of the Trinitarian claims, namely, that there is exactly one God. Second, the denial of the indiscernibility of identicals undercuts the motivation for positing more than one Person: in the creeds, and especially in the Athanasian Creed, the claim that the Persons are distinct is supported by pointing out that they have different properties.[30] If we allow discernibility without distinctness, we undercut the motivation for denying Modalism. So while SC does give us a new option for asserting polytheism, once we reject the indiscernibility of identicals we won't have any need to endorse polytheism, and thus no Trinity-based need to endorse SC.

So, I have shown that in addition to being of no help with one-one composition between God and the Persons, Strong Composition also doesn't help us claim they stand in a many-one composition relation, unless we accept a form of polytheism which has

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[30] "The Father was not made, nor created, nor generated by anyone. The Son is not made, nor created, but begotten by the Father alone. The Holy Spirit is not made, nor created, nor generated, but proceeds from the Father and the Son."

components that undercut the view's own motivation. So, I conclude that this bit of

strange yet interesting mereology is of no use to the Trinitarian.[31]

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