

Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity

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The doctrine of the Trinity maintains that there are exactly three divine Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) but only one God. The philosophical problem raised by this doctrine is well known. On the one hand, the doctrine seems clearly to imply that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are numerically distinct. How else could they be *three* Persons rather than one? On the other hand, it seems to imply that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical. If each Person is divine, how else could there be exactly *one* God? But Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot be both distinct and identical. Thus, the doctrine appears to be incoherent.

In the contemporary literature, there are two main strategies for solving the problem: the Relative Identity (RI) strategy, and the Social Trinitarian (ST) strategy.¹ Both of these strategies solve the problem by affirming the

¹ Proponents of the ST strategy include Timothy Bartel, "Could There Be More Than One Almighty?" *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 465–95, and "Could There Be More Than One Lord?" *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994): 357–78; David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), and "Trinitarian Personhood and Individuality," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. R. Feenstra and C. Plantinga (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 48–78; Stephen Davis, "A Somewhat Playful Proof of the Social Trinity in Five Easy Steps," *Philosophia Christi* 1, no. 2 (1999): 103–5; Peter Forrest, "Divine Fission: A New Way of Moderating Social Trinitarianism," *Religious Studies* 34 (1998): 281–97; C. Stephen Layman, "Tritheism and the Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 291–8; Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity," *Thomist* 50 (1986): 325–52, "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 37–53, and "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, 21–47; Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); and C. J. F. Williams, "Neither Confounding the Persons nor Dividing the Substance," in *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honor of Richard Swinburne*, ed. Alan Padgett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 227–43. The position is also commonly attributed to the Cappadocian Fathers. See especially Brown, *Divine Trinity*; Plantinga "Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity," and H. A. Wolfson, *Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*, vol. 1, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit while denying their absolute identity either with God or with one another. According to the RI strategy (which will be explained more fully below), the divine Persons 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, we might say, God-identical but Person-distinct. Peter Geach has argued for reasons independent of the problem of the Trinity that there is no such thing as absolute identity, that *all* well-formed identity statements are at least implicitly relativized, and that there is no in-principle obstacle to there being $x, y, F,$ and G such that x is the same F as y but not the same G .² Not surprisingly, then, some philosophers who have embraced the RI strategy have endorsed Geach's theory of relative identity along with it. But, as we shall see, Geach's theory is just one among several, and it is even possible to pursue the RI strategy without endorsing a theory of relative identity at all. The ST strategy, on the other hand, maintains that the relation between God and the Persons is not any sort of identity or sameness relation at all. Rather, it is 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). The main challenge for both strategies is to find some way of respecting the Christian commitment to *monotheism* without incurring other problems in the process.

The ST strategy has been roundly criticized in the literature, and many of the criticisms I wholeheartedly endorse.³ The RI strategy, on the other

Proponents of the RI strategy include James Cain, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Logic of Relative Identity," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 141–52; G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), at 118–20; A. P. Martinich, "Identity and Trinity," *Journal of Religion* 58 (1978): 169–81, and "God, Emperor, and Relative Identity," *Franciscan Studies* 39 (1979): 180–91; and 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.

² See Peter Geach, "Identity," *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967): 3–12, reprinted in his *Logic Matters* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 238–46; "Identity—A Reply," *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969): 556–9, reprinted in *Logic Matters*, 247–9; "Ontological Relativity and Relative Identity," in *Logic and Ontology*, ed. Milton K. Munitz (New York: New York University Press, 1973), 287–302; and *Reference and Generality*, 3rd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), sections 30, 34, and 110.

³ See, e.g., Timothy Bartel, "The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian," *Religious Studies* 24 (1988): 129–55; Jeffrey Brower, "The Problem with Social Trinitarianism: A Reply to Wierenga," *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming); Kelly James Clark, "Trinity or Tritheism?" *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 463–76; Edward Feser, "Swinburne's Tritheism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 42 (1997): 175–84; Brian Leftow, "Anti Social Trinitarianism," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen Davis; Daniel Kendall, SJ; Gerald O'Collins, SJ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203–49; and Trenton Merricks, "Split Brains and the Godhead," in *Knowledge and Reality: Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Thomas Crisp et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, forthcoming). Some of what I would be inclined to add to these criticisms is expressed in Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea, "Material Constitution and the Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming) and in my unpublished "Polytheism and Christian Belief."

hand, has been left largely untouched. Opponents of the strategy typically either dismiss it outright as unintelligible or else criticize it for reasons that simply do not apply to all theories of relative identity. Of course, if the RI strategy *is* unintelligible, or if the theories of relative identity that escape the usual criticisms are untenable, then these are serious objections that must be reckoned with. But, so far as I can tell, neither of these latter two claims has been adequately supported in the literature. Thus, it is not surprising that RI Trinitarians seem largely unmoved by the objections that have so far been raised against their position.

In the present paper, I hope to offer a more persuasive line of criticism. In particular, I will argue for the following two conclusions:

- (i) It is possible to pursue the RI strategy without endorsing a Geach-style theory of relative identity. But doing so without telling an appropriate supplemental story about the metaphysics underlying RI relations leaves one with an incomplete solution to the problem of the Trinity and also leaves one vulnerable to the charge of polytheism.
- (ii) Pursuing the RI strategy under the assumption that a Geach-style theory of relative identity is correct commits one to the view that the very existence of the divine Persons is a theory-dependent matter.

The consequences mentioned in (i) and (ii) are not acceptable. Thus, the RI strategy is unsuccessful as a stand-alone solution to the problem of the Trinity.⁴

I will begin in the first section by describing the doctrine of relative identity in some detail. In the second section, I will identify and describe two versions of the RI strategy—what I will call the *pure* RI strategy and the *impure* RI strategy. I will also discuss briefly what I take to be the standard criticisms of the RI strategy. My own objections to that strategy will then be presented in the third section.

Relative Identity

Classically understood, identity is an absolute relation that obeys Leibniz's Law.⁵ To say that identity is an absolute relation is to say (at least) that unqualified sentences of the form ' $x = y$ ' are well-formed and meaningful and that they are not to be analyzed in terms of sentences of the form ' x

⁴ The solution that I favor is plausibly seen as a conjunction of what I will later call the "impure" RI strategy with a supplemental story about the metaphysics of RI relations. Jeffrey Brower and I defend this solution in our "Material Constitution and the Trinity."

⁵ Note that I am here using the label 'Leibniz's Law' to refer simply to the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals. The converse principle—the principle of the identity of indiscernibles—is more controversial and plays no substantive role in the discussion that follows.

is the same F as y.’ To say that it obeys Leibniz’s Law is to say that it is governed by the following principle:

- (LL) For all x and y , x is identical to y only if, for all predicates ϕ , x satisfies ϕ if and only if y satisfies ϕ ; or, in symbols: $\forall x \forall y [x = y \supset (\forall \phi)(\phi(x) \equiv \phi(y))]$

As is well known, some philosophers reject the classical understanding of identity. Among those who do, some hold that identity is *relative*. Various different views have been advertised in the literature under the label ‘relative identity.’ Peter Geach, the earliest and most well known contemporary advocate of a theory of relative identity, endorses both of the following theses:⁶

- (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 .

Together, R1 and R2 imply, among other things, the following:

- (C1) Classical identity does not exist.
 (C2) LL is ill-formed.
 (C3) In general, x ’s being the same F as y does not guarantee that x is indiscernible from y .
 (C4) ‘ x is the same F as y ’ is not analyzable as ‘ x is an F, y is an F, and $x = y$.’

Let us refer to the conjunction of R1 and R2, together with the consequences C1–C4, as *Geach’s theory of relative identity*.

Not everyone who claims to embrace relative identity endorses Geach’s theory, however. For example, Eddy Zemach accepts R1 but proposes a replacement for R2, and Leslie Stevenson rejects both R1 and R2, but declares himself a relative identity theorist on the grounds that, on his view, ‘ $x = y$ ’ just *means* that, for some count noun F, x is the same F as y .⁷ And so not everyone who claims to be a relative identity theorist is committed to C1–C4. I will shortly offer reasons for doubting that some of the views just mentioned actually deserve to be called theories of relative identity. But for now the point is just that, in the literature on relative identity, there are alter-

⁶ See references in note 2 above.

⁷ Eddy Zemach, “In Defense of Relative Identity,” *Philosophical Studies* 26 (1974): 207–18; Leslie Stevenson, “Relative Identity and Leibniz’s Law,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1972): 155–8. I take it that saying that ‘ $x = y$ ’ *means* that x is the same F as y (for some count noun F), is not quite the same as saying that ‘ $x = y$ ’ is incomplete or ill-formed. Likewise, I think that R1 is not implied by the claim that $x = y$ if and only if there is some sortal F such that x is the same F as y .

natives to Geach's theory that are advertised by their proponents as theories of relative identity. And some of these alternatives *do* deserve the label.

Among the alternatives to Geach's theory, probably the most important is the one defended by Nicholas Griffin.⁸ Griffin rejects R1, but accepts R2 along with two further theses. The first is a thesis about the relationship between relative and absolute identity statements:

(R3) Sortal relative identity statements are more fundamental than absolute identity statements.

One implication of R3 is that absolute identity statements are to be analyzed or defined in terms of more primitive sortal-relative identity statements, rather than the other way around.

The second thesis is Griffin's proposed substitutivity principle for relative identity predicates:

(RLL) x is the same F as $y \equiv (\forall \phi \in \Delta_F)(Fx \ \& \ Fy \ \& \ \phi x \equiv \phi y)$

Intuitively, RLL just says that, for each general noun F , being the same F implies indiscernibility with respect to the members of some class of predicates, Δ_F . Note that RLL leaves open the possibility that there are predicates *not* in Δ_F .

Griffin introduces RLL because, as he notes, a theory of relative identity ought to license inferences like (I) and (II) below without licensing inferences like (III):

(I) x is the same color as y ; x is red. Therefore, y is red.

(II) x is the same car as y ; x is twelve feet long. Therefore, y is twelve feet long.

(III) x is the same color as y ; x is a car. Therefore, y is a car.

RLL is supposed to provide a way of getting what we want without contradicting R2; and, Griffin argues, adding it to a classical second-order logic generates a consistent and complete theory of relative identity. Moreover, the logic that results will be one within which classical identity is consistently definable.⁹

R3, on the other hand, is supposed to follow from Griffin's view that individuation without sortals is impossible. He writes:

It is hard to see how any sense can be made of the notion of an individual item without individuation, and it is hard to see how sense can be made of individuation without sortals which supply the principles which make individuation possible. In view of this, it seems to me

⁸ *Relative Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). See also Richard Routley and Nicholas Griffin, "Towards a Logic of Relative Identity," *Logique et Analyse* 22 (1979): 65–83.

⁹ One way is to define it as follows (where ' $x =_F y$ ' abbreviates ' x is the same F as y '):

$$(\equiv) \quad x = y \equiv (\forall F)[(Fx \ \& \ Fy) \supset x =_F y]$$

Another way is simply to define it by way of LL.

that, while all types of identity statements are admissible, sortal-relative identity statements have the most fundamental role to play, for without them we cannot make sense of the notion of an individual item. Once we have individuated some items by means of a sortal and found, say, that the item named by 'a' and that named by 'b' are the same F, we can go on to ask if they share all their properties and are thus the same absolutely.¹⁰

It is, of course, tempting to ask here what our individuation practices could possibly have to do with the *identity* of the things that we individuate. Why should the fact that we individuate things by way of sortal concepts go any distance toward showing that nothing is distinct from anything else absolutely and independently of our sortal concepts? The answer should be obvious: It does not go any distance toward showing this *unless* we presuppose a decidedly antirealist metaphysic. And this is precisely the sort of metaphysic that Griffin thinks underlies relative identity theory.

Michael Dummett brings this point out nicely. In discussing Geach's theory of relative identity, Dummett raises the question of how quantifiers are to be interpreted. His worry is as follows:

. . . there is a compelling feeling of incompatibility between the picture that we are accustomed to form of the classical interpretation of the quantifiers and the picture evoked by Geach's doctrine on identity. . . . [On the classical treatment of quantifiers], the *picture* we have of what constitutes a domain of objects which can serve as the range of the individual variables is such that it is impossible to see how there could be any objection to supposing an absolute relation of identity to be defined on it: the elements of the domain are thought of as being, in Quine's words, the same or different absolutely. . . . [But] it seems that Geach means us to picture that over which the variables range as an amorphous lump of reality, in itself not articulated into distinct objects. Such an articulation may be accomplished in any one of many different ways: we slice up reality into distinct individual objects by selecting a particular criterion of identity.¹¹

The apparent tension between Geach's theory of identity and the classical treatment of quantifiers arises because of Geach's commitment to R1. But Griffin also stands against the classical treatment of quantifiers on the grounds that "it gets the semantics upside down."¹² On the classical treatment, the individuation of objects in the domain is independent of our sorting procedures. But Griffin wants it the other way around. Thus, he endorses Dummett's characterization of the metaphysic underlying Geach's theory of

¹⁰ Griffin, *Relative Identity*, 159.

¹¹ Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Harper and Row, 1973), 562–3.

¹² Griffin, *Relative Identity*, 158.

relative identity as an accurate description of the metaphysic underlying his own.

As I have already indicated, views other than Griffin's and Geach's sometimes go under the label 'relative identity.' As I see it, however, no view deserves that label unless it is committed to either R1 or R3. Views according to which classical identity exists and is no less fundamental than other sameness relations are simply not views according to which *identity* is relative. Perhaps there are multiple sameness relations, and perhaps some of those relations are both sortal relative and such that R2 is true of them. But so long as classical identity exists and is suitably fundamental—that is, so long as classical identity exists and is not to be analyzed in terms of more primitive relative identity relations—there seems to be no reason whatsoever to think of other “sameness” relations as identity relations.¹³ Thus, on views that reject both R1 and R3, there seems to be no reason for thinking that identity is nonabsolute.

The RI Strategy

The RI strategy for solving the problem of the Trinity comes in two varieties. The *pure* strategy endorses each of the following two claims:

- (RI_A) Some doctrine of relative identity (that is, some doctrine that includes either R1 or R3) is true.
- (RI_B) The words 'is God' and 'is distinct from' in Trinitarian formulations express relativized identity and distinctness relations rather than absolute identity and distinctness.

The *impure* strategy endorses RI_B without endorsing RI_A.

The “Trinitarian formulations” mentioned in RI_B include statements like these:

- (T1) Each Person of the Trinity is distinct from each of the others.
- (T2) Each Person of the Trinity is God.

According to both versions of the RI strategy, the relations expressed by 'is God' and 'is distinct from' in statements like T1 and T2 are relations like *being the same God as* and *being a distinct Person from*, respectively. As *relativized* identity relations, they are not to be analyzed in terms of classical identity, and they do not guarantee the indiscernibility of their rela—

¹³ Aristotle's “accidental sameness,” for example, appears to be a relation that fits this description. That is, it is plausibly taken as a “sameness” relation; it is sortal relative and obeys R2; but it is not an identity relation, and belief in accidental sameness does not preclude belief in absolute identity. For further discussion of accidental sameness, see my “Sameness Without Identity: An Aristotelian Solution to the Problem of Material Constitution,” *Ratio* 11 (1998): 316–28, reprinted in *Form and Matter: Contemporary Themes in Metaphysics*, ed. David S. Oderberg (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999), 103–16; and Brower and Rea, “Material Constitution and the Trinity.”

this regardless of whether classical identity happens to exist. In other words, predicates like ‘is the same God as’ and ‘is the same Person as’ are predicates of which R2 is true, and they are governed by RLL rather than by LL.

According to RI Trinitarians, T1 and T2 are to be understood as equivalent to T1a and T2a, respectively:

(T1a) No Person of the Trinity is the same Person as any of the others.
(That is, the Father is not the same Person as the Son, the Father is not the same Person as the Spirit, and the Son is not the same Person as the Spirit.)

(T2a) Each Person of the Trinity is the same God as each of the others. Since ‘same God as’ and ‘same Person as’ do not pick out relations that obey LL, no contradiction can be derived from their conjunction with T3:

(T3) There is exactly one God.

Thus, the RI strategy apparently manages to respect the “oneness” of God without giving up the “threeness” of the Persons.

As indicated earlier, there has been relatively little by way of explicit criticism of this strategy in the literature on the Trinity; and, of the few critical remarks that *have* been offered, none seem especially persuasive. Broadly speaking, the two standard objections are these: (i) that the view requires its proponents to reject the principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals;¹⁴ and (ii) that, on the assumption that statements of the form ‘A is the same F as B’ are not just equivalent to statements of the form ‘A and B are both Fs, and A = B,’ RI predicates are unintelligible.¹⁵ As the previous section makes clear, objection (i) is simply false. Objection (ii) seems to me to be on target, but, by itself and without further development, it is unlikely to move those who think that they *can* understand the RI solution (which, of course, will be *every single proponent of that solution*, and perhaps some fence-sitters as well). More needs to be said if the RI strategy is to be effectively undermined. It is to that task that I now turn.

Objections

I will start by explaining why I think that what I have called the *impure* RI strategy ought to be rejected. Recall that this strategy involves embracing RI_B *without* embracing RI_A—that is, without embracing a doctrine of relative identity. This is the sort of strategy that is pursued by the most well-known proponent of the RI solution to the problem of the Trinity, Peter van

¹⁴ See Bartel, “The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian.”

¹⁵ See Richard Cartwright, “On the Logical Problem of the Trinity,” in his *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 187–200; and Merricks, “Split Brains and the Godhead.”

Inwagen.¹⁶ His view, therefore, will be my focus in the first part of the discussion that follows.

Van Inwagen remains explicitly neutral on the question whether absolute identity exists, and he also refrains from committing himself to anything like R1 or R3. Instead, he simply starts with two undefined RI predicates—‘is the same person as’ and ‘is the same being as’—and assumes, in effect, that R2 is true of both.¹⁷ From there, he proceeds to construct translations of T1–T3 in a language devoid of singular referring terms and involving no RI predicates other than those defined in terms of the two primitives and various one-place predicates like ‘is divine,’ ‘begets,’ ‘is begotten,’ and ‘proceeds.’¹⁸ In brief, the task of translation is carried out as follows: Let B stand for the *same being as* relation. Let Gx abbreviate ‘x is divine and $\forall y(y \text{ is divine} \supset xBy)$.’ Gx, then, is the RI equivalent of ‘x is God.’ Let F, S, and H stand for predicates (‘begets,’ ‘is begotten,’ and ‘proceeds’) that have the following properties: (a) they are satisfied, if at all, by a divine Person, (b) if x and y satisfy one of them, then x is the same person as y, and (c) if x satisfies one and y satisfies another, then x is not the same person as y. We can then stipulate that Fx, Sx, and Hx are,

¹⁶ See his “And Yet They Are Not Three Gods.”

¹⁷ Note that van Inwagen’s ‘same person as’ relation is different from the relation that would be expressed by the words ‘same Person as.’ I have been treating ‘Person’ as a *sui generis* sortal term that applies only to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But van Inwagen’s terminology makes no distinction as regards personhood between the divine Persons and human persons.

¹⁸ The Father begets; the Son is begotten; the Spirit proceeds; and all three are divine. Singular referring expressions are banned for the sake of neutrality with respect to the existence of classical identity. According to van Inwagen:

The philosopher who eschews classical, absolute identity must also eschew singular terms, for the idea of a singular term is—at least in currently orthodox semantical theory—inseparably bound to the classical semantical notion of reference or denotation; and this notion, in its turn, is inseparably bound to the idea of classical identity. It is a part of the orthodox semantical concept of reference that reference is a many-one relation. And it is a part of the idea of a many-one relation . . . that if x bears such a relation to y and bears it to z, then y and z are absolutely identical. (That’s what it says on the label.) (“And Yet They Are Not Three Gods,” 259)

Note, however, that there is reason to doubt that singular referring expressions *must* be banned. If the quoted line of reasoning is correct, RI theorists should have trouble with counting generally. But, assuming they do not have general problems counting, why could not a relative identity theorist just say, e.g., that reference is a relation between many words and one man, or between many words and one horse, or between many words and one . . . etc.? If the worry is that relativists cannot make sense of the notion that there is *one* horse standing in the ‘is referred to by’ relation to various words, then how can we expect them to count at all? And, importantly, how can we expect them to offer an adequate translation of T3—the thesis that there is *exactly one* God? On the other hand, if identifying one horse as the referent of various names is not the problem, it is hard to see what would be the problem with singular reference. Notably, neither Geach nor Griffin seems especially concerned about the issue.

respectively, the RI equivalents of ‘*x* is the Father,’ ‘*x* is the Son,’ and ‘*x* is the Holy Spirit.’¹⁹ Finally, let *P* stand for the *same person as* relation. Given all this, a sentence like ‘The Father is God’ may be translated simply as ‘ $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ Gx)$.’ Thus, theses T1 and T2 may be translated as follows:

$$(RT1) \ \exists x\exists y\exists z(Fx \ \& \ Sy \ \& \ Hz \ \& \ \neg xPy \ \& \ \neg xPz \ \& \ \neg yPz)$$

$$(RT2) \ \exists x\exists y\exists z(Fx \ \& \ Gx \ \& \ Sy \ \& \ Gy \ \& \ Hz \ \& \ Gz)$$

On the assumption that counting *Gods* is a matter of counting *divine beings* rather than counting (say) *divine persons*, *Gx* will also be the RI equivalent of ‘*x* is the one and only God.’ Thus, we have the following translation for T3:

$$(RT3) \ \exists xGx$$

RT3 is entailed by RT2; and since the only “identity” predicates involved in RT1–RT3 are predicates that do not obey Leibniz’s Law, there is no way to derive a contradiction from the conjunction of RT1 and RT2. Admittedly, given our stipulations, we *can* derive the following claim: $\exists x\exists y(xBy \ \& \ xPx \ \& \ \neg xPy)$.²⁰ Given those same stipulations, however, that claim is not contradictory.

But what has been accomplished? Let us grant that the above translations are plausible. Has van Inwagen shown that the doctrine of the Trinity is coherent? Surprisingly, the answer is no. To be sure, he has shown that, on one way of understanding them, no contradiction can be derived from T1–T3 alone (or from suitably similar conjunctions of Trinitarian claims). But by remaining neutral on the question whether absolute identity exists, he leaves open the possibility that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are absolutely

¹⁹ Cf. van Inwagen, “And Yet They Are Not Three Gods,” 265–7.

²⁰ Here is the derivation: From RT2 and the definition of *Gx* we get RT4:

$$(RT4) \ \exists x\exists y\exists z(Fx \ \& \ x \ \text{is divine} \ \& \ \forall m(m \ \text{is divine} \ \supset \ xBm) \ \& \ Sy \ \& \ y \ \text{is divine} \ \& \ \forall m(m \ \text{is divine} \ \supset \ yBm) \ \& \ Hz \ \& \ z \ \text{is divine} \ \& \ \forall m(m \ \text{is divine} \ \supset \ zBm)).$$

RT4 implies RT5:

$$(RT5) \ \exists x\exists y\exists z(Fx \ \& \ Sy \ \& \ Hz \ \& \ xBy \ \& \ xBz \ \& \ yBz).$$

Given our stipulations about *F*, *S*, and *H*, RT5 implies RT6:

$$(RT6) \ \exists x\exists y\exists z(Fx \ \& \ Sy \ \& \ Hz \ \& \ xBy \ \& \ xBz \ \& \ yBz \ \& \ \neg xPy \ \& \ \neg xPz \ \& \ \neg yPz).$$

And, given those same stipulations, RT6 implies RT7:

$$(RT7) \ \exists x\exists y\exists z(xPx \ \& \ yPy \ \& \ zPz \ \& \ xBy \ \& \ xBz \ \& \ yBz \ \& \ \neg xPy \ \& \ \neg xPz \ \& \ \neg yPz).$$

Simplification of RT7, in turn, yields the desired conclusion, RT8:

$$(RT8) \ \exists x\exists y(xBy \ \& \ xPx \ \& \ \neg xPy).$$

distinct, and if they are absolutely distinct, it is hard to see what it could possibly mean to say that they are the *same being*, as RT2 implies. Thus, in order for his argument to be convincing, it appears that van Inwagen must *rule out* the possibility that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are absolutely distinct. But he cannot do this while remaining neutral on the question whether absolute identity exists.

Let me put this point another way. If absolute identity exists, the following is a rather compelling principle:

$$(P) (\forall x \forall y)(x \neq y \supset \neg xBy)$$

'Being' is plausibly the most general sortal, on a par with sortals like 'entity,' 'thing,' and 'object.' Thus, '*x* is (absolutely) distinct from *y*' seems to be synonymous with '*x* is not the same being (thing, entity, object) as *y*.' If this is right, then P is analytic. But the conjunction of P with RT1 and RT2 is incoherent.²¹ Thus, van Inwagen's arguments show that the doctrine of the Trinity is coherent *only* on the assumption that P is not true.²² A Trinitarian who accepts P will not escape the charge of incoherence by accepting RT1 and RT2 as translations of T1 and T2. Thus, *given* that P is highly intuitive, in order to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is coherent, van Inwagen must give us some reason for thinking that P is not true. One who accepts R1 can easily provide such a reason: P is not true, she will say, because it is ill-formed. It is ill-formed because it includes the formula '*x* ≠ *y*.' But van Inwagen does not want to commit to R1, and he has offered us no other reason for believing that P is false.

There are at least two morals to draw from this discussion. One is that pursuing the impure RI strategy offers at best an incomplete solution to the problem of the Trinity. At the very least, a story will have to be told that explains how R2 could be true of the sameness relations invoked in Trinitarian formulations. Moreover, the story will have to be nonheretical. (Thus, for example, telling a story according to which Father, Son, and Holy

²¹ Here is the proof. As stated above, from RT1 & RT2 we can derive RT8:

$$(RT8) \exists x \exists y (xB_y \& xPx \& \emptyset xPy).$$

But, allowing that there is such a thing as absolute distinctness, the conjunction $xPx \& \emptyset xPy$ implies $x \neq y$. Thus, RT8 implies RT9:

$$(RT9) \exists x \exists y (xB_y \& x \neq y)$$

But RT9, together with P, implies the contradictory RT10:

$$(RT10) \exists x \exists y (xB_y \& \emptyset xBy).$$

²² Van Inwagen acknowledges this point ("And Yet They Are Not Three Gods," 262, 265), but he does not seem to see it as a source of any serious objection to his project.

Spirit can be the same God but different Persons in just the same way that two cars can be the same color but different cars clearly will not do the job.)

The other moral is that even embracing a Griffin-like theory of relative identity—that is, a theory that does not rule out classical identity—will leave one vulnerable to polytheism, or worse. Monotheism requires that there be exactly one being who is God. But, as we have just seen, if classical identity makes its way into one's logic, T1 and T2 together seem to imply that there are three distinct beings who “are” God. And now the familiar problem is back: incoherence looms, unless we can tell a story (other than the “absolute identity” story) about what it is to “be” God that is both orthodox and plausible. Elsewhere, Jeffrey Brower and I offer such a story, and we do so without embracing any doctrine of relative identity.²³ But my point here is just that some such story is needed and has not so far been offered by anyone who wishes to pursue the impure RI strategy.

I conclude, then, that absent some supplementary story explaining the metaphysics of RI relations, the impure RI strategy is unacceptable. But what about the pure RI strategy? As I see it, the consequences of that strategy are catastrophic. The reason is that, as noted above, the doctrine of relative identity seems to presuppose an antirealist metaphysic. I have already quoted Dummett's reasons for thinking that relative identity goes hand in hand with antirealism. But we can bring the presupposition to light in another way by taking a brief look at Geach's main argument for the relativity of identity.²⁴

Geach thinks that semantic paradoxes (for example, Richard's and Grelling's) prevent us from reading LL as saying that $x = y$ if and only if *whatever is true of x is true of y* .²⁵ Thus, he says, we must read it instead as saying (roughly) that $x = y$ if and only if x and y are *indiscernible with respect to all of the predicates that form the descriptive resources of our*

²³ Brower and Rea, “Material Constitution and the Trinity.”

²⁴ What follows is a summary of the argument on behalf of RI that is presented in Geach, “Identity.” But see also his “Ontological Relativity.”

²⁵ To see why one might think this, consider Grelling's Paradox: Let the word ‘heterological’ mean ‘is not true of itself.’ Thus, ‘long’ is heterological, since it is not a long word; ‘unspeakable’ is heterological, since it can be spoken; etc. Now, by definition, ‘heterological’ is heterological only if it is not true of itself; but if it is not true of itself, then it is *not* heterological. So ‘heterological’ is heterological if and only if it is not heterological, which is contradictory. One way to solve this paradox (and others) is to hold that truth is relativized to a language, so that, e.g., we can speak in a language other than L of what is true-in-L of a thing x , but we cannot speak *in L* of what is true *simpliciter* of x . (Cf. Alfred Tarski, “The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages,” in his *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics: Papers from 1923–1938*, 2nd ed., trans. J. H. Woodger [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983], 152–278 and “The Establishment of Scientific Semantics” in the same volume, 401–8.) But if we adopt this solution, or one relevantly similar to it, then we must reject constructions like ‘whatever is true of x ’

theory. But if this is right, then identity is best construed as theory-relative. The reason is that whereas one theory might have the descriptive resources to distinguish x from y , another theory might not. By the lights of the first theory, then, $x = y$ is false, whereas, by the lights of the second theory, $x = y$ is true. But that is incoherent if $x = y$ is understood as expressing *absolute* identity. Better, then, to treat it as expressing sortal-relative identity. Treating it that way, we can say that x and y are the same F but not the same G (where, presumably, G is a predicate in our first theory but not our second), and the incoherence dissolves.

To see the point more clearly, consider the following example. Imagine two theories: one, T_1 , which includes the sortal ‘lump of clay’ but no artifact sortals (like ‘statue’ or ‘bowl’), and another, T_2 , which includes the sortals ‘lump of clay,’ ‘statue,’ and ‘bowl,’ and, furthermore, treats statues and bowls that have been made from the same lump of clay as distinct items. Now suppose a T_1 -theorist and a T_2 -theorist watch a sculptor take a lump of clay and make first (what the T_2 -theorist would call) a statue, then a bowl. By the lights of the T_1 -theorist, the sculptor does not manage to generate or destroy anything. What the T_2 -theorist would call “the statue” and “the bowl” are identical. By the lights of the T_2 -theorist, however, statue and bowl are distinct. But, obviously, *both* cannot be right. Thus, we have a problem. One way out is to say that identity is theory-relative: the bowl and statue are the same lump of clay; they are not the same bowl or statue; and there is simply no fact about whether they are absolutely identical or distinct. But if we do say this (taking very seriously the claim that there is *no* theory-independent fact about *what* there is or about how many things there are in the various regions occupied by what the T_1 -theorist calls “the lump of clay”), then we commit ourselves to the view that the very existence of things like statues, bowls, and lumps of clay depends upon the theories that recognize them. This is antirealism.

Many philosophers are attracted to antirealism, but accepting it as part of a solution to the problem of the Trinity is disastrous. For clearly orthodoxy will not permit us to say that the very existence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a *theory-dependent* matter. Nor will it permit us to say that the distinctness of the divine Persons is somehow relative to our ways of thinking or theorizing. The latter appears to be a form of modalism.²⁶ And yet it is hard to see how it could be otherwise if Geach’s theory of relative identity is true. For what else could it possibly mean to say that there is

²⁶ Modalism is the view that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not really distinct from one another. According to modalism, each Person is just God in a different guise, or playing a different role—much like Superman and Clark Kent are just the Kryptonian Kal-El in different guises, or playing different roles.

simply no fact about whether Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same thing as one another, the same thing as God, or, indeed, the same thing as Baal?

Perhaps there is a way for proponents of R1 to dodge commitment to antirealism. For perhaps there is some alternative metaphysic that might sensibly be thought to underlie a Geach-style theory of relative identity. (Though the quotations from Dummett and Griffin, and the argument on behalf of R1 supplied by Geach, *suggest* that R1 commits its adherents to antirealism, they do not, after all, *prove* that conclusion.) But it is hard to see what that metaphysic might be. Thus, for the relative identity theorist who wants to avoid commitment to antirealism, the charge of incoherence becomes an objection seriously to be reckoned with. What motivates commitment to R1, if not reasoning of the sort described above (reasoning, again, that leads straight to antirealism)? What can the would-be realist RI theorist say in response to Dummett's worries about quantification in the context of an RI logic? I said earlier that the charge of unintelligibility is unpersuasive mainly because proponents of relative identity have taken pains to try to make their view intelligible, and the accounts they have offered along these lines have not themselves been shown to be unintelligible. But if one rejects what proponents of relative identity have to say about the motivation and metaphysics underlying their view, the charge of unintelligibility returns with a vengeance, and I cannot see how that charge can be rebutted without embracing antirealism.

Moreover, even if we concede that R1 can be squared with a realist metaphysic, the fact remains that it is extremely implausible, and what few arguments have been marshaled on its behalf have been strongly (and rightly, in my opinion) criticized in the literature.²⁷ Thus, even apart from its anti-realist consequences, I think that there are ample grounds for rejecting R1.

²⁷ See especially Fred Feldman, "Geach and Relative Identity," *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969): 547–55, and "A Rejoinder," *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969): 560–1; Michael Dummett, *Frege*, ch. 16; *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), ch. 11; and "Does Quantification Involve Identity?" in *Peter Geach: Philosophical Encounters*, ed. Harry Lewis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991); Griffin, *Relative Identity*, ch. 8; Jack Nelson, "Relative Identity," *Noûs* 4 (1970): 241–60; Douglas Odegard, "Identity Through Time," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1972): 29–38; John Perry, "The Same *F*," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1972): 181–200; and W. V. O. Quine, review of *Reference and Generality*, by Peter Geach, *Philosophical Review* 73 (1964): 100–4. For additional, general criticisms of the doctrine of relative identity, see also John Hawthorne, "Identity," in *The Oxford Handbook for Metaphysics*, ed. Michael Loux and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Conclusion

I have argued, in effect, that RI theorists face a dilemma. If they pursue the impure RI strategy, or even if they pursue a pure strategy that falls short of endorsing R1, they leave open the possibility that absolute identity exists. In leaving open that possibility, and without telling an appropriate supplemental story about the metaphysics underling RI relations, they find themselves with an incomplete solution to the problem of the Trinity and they leave themselves vulnerable to polytheism. If they pursue the pure RI strategy, then they are committed to thinking that the existence and distinctness of the divine Persons is somehow a theory-dependent matter—a view that implies modalism, or worse. I have acknowledged that this latter commitment can be avoided by giving up standard views about the motivation and metaphysics underlying relative identity theory. But in giving up those standard views, the relative identity theorist incurs the burden of supplying alternative motivation and an alternative explanation of the metaphysic underlying her theory of identity. So far, this has not been done; and it seems to me that it *cannot* be done apart from a commitment to antirealism. In light of these considerations, I conclude that the RI solution to the problem of the Trinity, taken as a stand-alone solution to that problem, is unsuccessful.²⁸

²⁸ This paper has greatly benefited from the advice of J. C. Beall, Michael Bergmann, Tom Crisp, John Hawthorne, Brian Leftow, Trenton Merricks, and especially Jeff Brower.

