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Trinity Monotheism and Daniel Howard-Snyder's "Diminished Divinity Problem"

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Christians affirm with Jews and Muslims the oneness of God, which is affirmed in the Old Testament by the verse, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”¹ Christians have also traditionally affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, which holds that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God, “their glory equal, their majesty coeternal,” as the Athanasian Creed affirms.² The entire Athanasian Creed is laced with language that may, *prima facie*, appear to be strictly contradictory. The Creed affirms that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternal and yet affirm that only one God exists.³ The great challenge of Christian philosophical theology concerning the Trinity is to explain how God could be both three and one. This is the chief problem with which any *trinitarian* Christian theologian or philosopher must wrestle.⁴ In response to this, philosophical theologians have proposed several models of the Trinity that seek to be both logically coherent and theologically sound. Of these, I will focus on Trinity Monotheism.

Before I address Trinity monotheism, however, some terms must be defined. Models of the Trinity attempt to strike a balance between unitarianism, the view that God is one being *and* one person, and tritheism, the view that three gods exist. Various models, such as Richard Swinburne’s, are criticized for their tritheism, whereas some philosophers, such as, for example, Daniel Howard-Snyder, are criticized for their commitment to God as *a* person, which implies unitarianism.⁵ Striking that balance, then, is clearly difficult, and we will have to address

¹ Deut. 6:4 ESV

² The Athanasian Creed can be found at Christian Reformed Church, “Athanasian Creed,” *Christian Reformed Church*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/athanasian-creed>. This translation of the Athanasian Creed was completed in 1988, as is stated on the webpage.

³ Ibid.

⁴ I add the caveat of *trinitarian* Christian to point out that there are non-trinitarian doctrines, but these are generally rejected as heretical-and are rejected as such in the Athanasian Creed-and don’t represent the majority of Christians, lay or scholar.

⁵ William Lane Craig criticizes Howard-Snyder in this way in William Lane Craig, “Trinity Monotheism Once More: A Response to Daniel Howard-Snyder,” *Philosophia Christi* 8, no. 1 (2006): 106.

whether or not Trinity Monotheism does this well. Also important to this paper will be the distinction between *being* and *person* and what is referred to when words such as “the Persons” and “God” are used. What does it mean to say something like, “The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God,” and, “One God exists”? Finally, in order to be theologically sound as a *Christian* doctrine, the model should be consistent with what the Bible says concerning God, otherwise called the biblical data. Not all of these issues can be addressed in detail in this paper, but some issues can be broached.

With this in mind, what is Trinity Monotheism? William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland’s account of Trinity Monotheism is both too detailed and too technical to be covered completely in the space available, but a concise definition can be proposed and analyzed. At its heart, Trinity Monotheism, according to Craig and Moreland, holds to the view “that while the persons of the Trinity are divine, it is the Trinity as a whole that is properly God.”⁶ This model involves two claims, which are crucial to the truth of the model. The first is that the Trinity is absolutely identical to God; to say that God exists *is just to say* that the Trinity exists. The second, which is closely related to the first, is that the “is” of the statement, “The Father is God,” is different from the “is” of the statement, “The Trinity is God.” In the former statement, the meaning of “is” is attributive; the Father is not *a* God but rather has the property of divinity. In the latter statement, the “is” is of identity; the meaning of this statement is the same as if one were saying, “The Trinity=God.” This is key because, if *p* is identical to *r*, and *q* is identical to *r*, then *p* is identical to *q*. In the same way, this argument could be made:

1. The Father=God.

⁶ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2003), 589.

2. The Son=God.

3. Therefore, the Father=the Son.

But this isn't what Trinity Monotheism claims. The Father is not *a* God. By attributing divinity to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit while maintaining that only one God, the Trinity as a whole, exists, the first and second premises are negated, rendering the above argument unsound.

But how are we to think of this? According to Moreland and Craig, we can think of this as a part-whole relationship, according to which the Persons of the Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are divine "parts," as it were, of the Trinity as a whole, who is uniquely the one true God (or, as they put it, the only instance of the divine nature).⁷ This requires that there are two ways to be divine. Using the analogy of a cat, they argue that one way to be feline is to be "a proper part of a cat," whereas the cat is feline in virtue of being a cat. Yet the cat is the only instance of the *feline nature*, in which case only one cat exists. Multiple cats don't exist in virtue of the kidneys, lungs, heart, etc. being feline. Yet both the organs of the cat and the cat are truly feline.⁸ This merely describes the part-whole relationship between the Persons and the Trinity, however, and not how three centers of consciousness aren't three separate individual beings, rather than one being. Here, Moreland and Craig use the mythical three-headed dog, Cerberus, as an analogy. If we were to name the three centers of consciousness (the three heads) Rover, Bowser, and Spike and endow them with all of the properties, such as rationality and self-consciousness, which are indicative of persons, then it is clear, they claim, that Cerberus *is*

⁷ Moreland and Craig make this claim when they say that "the Trinity is the only instance of the divine nature, and therefore there is but one God." J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2003), 590.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 591.

one dog, not three, and yet that three centers of consciousness exist.⁹ Rover could speak with Bowser, and Bowser with Spike, and so on. Further, the name Cerberus refers to the “whole,” as it were, or the one dog itself.

One might argue that the analogy is not a good one, since Cerberus is a physical being. How can *unembodied* minds not be three individual beings? To this, Moreland and Craig ask us to consider the soul of a human person. According to mind-body dualism, the mind or soul exists independently of the body. In humans, the mind is endowed with rationality and self-awareness, which we associate with the property of personhood. Thus, we could say that the human soul is endowed with only that set of properties sufficient for the personhood of one center of consciousness.¹⁰ If we think of God in the same way, as a soul, then why can't we say that God has *three* sets of rational faculties? The Persons simply share the one soul, which we call God. As such, God is not *a* Person, in the same sense that the Father is, but He is personal, since He is endowed with such faculties in virtue of the Persons.

With Moreland and Craig's model explicated, we can now analyze it. It is important to note that what is called Trinity Monotheism according to Moreland and Craig is *not* necessarily typical of all proponents of Trinity Monotheism. William Hasker's survey of social trinitarianism, in which he outlines Brian Leftow's critique of Trinity Monotheism, proves this point, since the authors that he cites (and, consequently, that Leftow cites) hold that each Person, taken individually, is not “fully God.”¹¹ By holding that the Persons are not fully God,

⁹ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2003), 593.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 594.

¹¹ William Hasker, “Objections to Social Trinitarianism,” *Religious Studies* 46, no. 4 (2010): 429. I object here to the use of the phrase “fully God.” It is difficult to understand exactly what it means to be “fully” something. As Hasker makes clear, what the Trinity Monotheists to which he's referring mean is that none of the Persons exemplify the divine superlative attributes, though the Trinity as a whole does. This seems to me to amount to the

monotheism is maintained, since only God, as the Trinity, has those attributes necessary for full divinity. The Persons can be called God only in virtue of their “membership in the Trinity.”¹²

Contrast this with Moreland and Craig’s model, which holds that the Trinity as a whole is omnipotent, omniscient, and the like only in virtue of the Persons. Since the Persons exemplify these divine attributes, the Trinity does as well. In fact, for Craig, this makes God more worthy of worship than a “more meagerly endowed soul,” that is, a soul with only one set of rational faculties.¹³ It is important to note again that on Moreland and Craig’s model, there are two ways to be divine, in the same way that there are two ways to be feline. These issues are interrelated and will inform my response to Howard-Snyder and to Trinity Monotheism itself.

Howard-Snyder objects to Trinity Monotheism on many fronts, and his critique is much too detailed and lengthy for a full response. But I find his so-called Diminished Divinity objection most interesting. This is one of his shortest and most tentative objections to their model, but I think that it is important to his understanding of the model. He grants that if there are two ways to be divine, both by being the Trinity and by being a proper part of the Trinity, then this avoids the objection that four instances of the divine nature exist, namely, the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the Trinity itself. According to Howard-Snyder, however, this results in a situation in which the Persons exemplify a diminished divinity compared to that of the Trinity. As he states, if the Persons are divine because they are proper parts of the Trinity, “then they are no more God-like than a feline skeleton is cat-like.”¹⁴

notion that none of the Persons is *truly* God, which will be important in my analysis of Howard-Snyder’s Diminished Divinity objection later in this paper.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ William Lane Craig, “Trinity Monotheism Once More: A Response to Daniel Howard-Snyder,” *Philosophia Christi* 8, no. 1 (2006): 106.

¹⁴ Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Trinity Monotheism,” *Philosophia Christi* 5, no. 2 (2003): 379.

Here, it seems to me that Howard-Snyder's objection is mistaken for two reasons. The first is that he seems to misunderstand what the analogy is intended to represent. Obviously, the skeleton of a cat doesn't exemplify all of the properties (eg. soft fur, an affinity for yarn, etc.) essential to being a cat. That there are two ways to be feline only shows that the property of felinity, which we could call f , can be exemplified in two ways, either by being a cat or by being a proper part of a cat. In the same way, the Persons of the Trinity and the Trinity as a whole share the property of being divine, which we could call d , since d can be exemplified in two different ways. That the cat and the skeleton of the cat share the property f is what is important about the analogy, not to what extent the skeleton of a cat is a cat. In fact, it is probable that having a feline skeleton is essential to being a cat, in which case the feline skeleton of a cat clearly couldn't be a cat. It *just is* the skeleton of a cat. Therefore, at face value, Howard-Snyder's objection fails, since it misunderstands what the cat analogy is intended to represent.

Second, and more importantly, the objection is fallacious, for it argues that since the part-whole relationship of the Persons to the Trinity as a whole is like that of the skeleton of a cat to the cat, then the Persons are just as God-like, relative to the Trinity, as the skeleton of a cat is cat-like, relative to the cat. This is related to my first point. The analogy merely shows that a property can be exemplified in two different ways, such that the part shares a certain property with the whole. The similarity of the part to the whole with respect to other properties is irrelevant. In either case, it clearly doesn't follow that because the skeleton of the cat and the cat are dissimilar, then the Persons of the Trinity and the Trinity are dissimilar. In fact, it is possible that the only property that the Trinity exemplifies and not the Persons is the property of being

triune. Since this property is absolutely identical to being *a* God, or an instance of the divine nature, then this is an important difference, but it wouldn't make the Persons any less *divine* than the Trinity. In this case, the fact that the Persons and the Trinity share *d* doesn't imply anything about how dissimilar they are with regard to their other properties.

Let's explore this a bit further. If we consider which properties there are in the Persons and the Trinity, we could consider a conjunction of properties, according to which omniscience would be *OS*, omnipotence would be *OP*, omnipresence would be *OPR*, moral perfection would be *MP*, and so on. If these properties are necessary for being divine, along with either being the Trinity (symbolized as *TR*) or being a proper part of the Trinity (symbolized as *PP*), then the natures of the Persons could be symbolized as such:

The Father: {*OS & OP & OPR & MP & PP...*}

The Son: {*OS & OP & OPR & MP & PP...*}

The Holy Spirit: {*OS & OP & OPR & MP & PP...*}¹⁵

In almost every way, the Trinity as a whole is identical, except for the fact that it exemplifies the divine nature or is *a* God, as can be symbolized by *DN*. The Trinity is also divine with respect to *TR*, not *PP*. This can be symbolized in this way:

The Trinity: {*OS & OP & OPR & MP & TR & DN...*}¹⁶

This, I think, gives us a good answer to Howard-Snyder's Diminished Divinity Problem.

If there are two ways to be divine, which the Persons and the Trinity all exemplify, then the

¹⁵ My claim is not that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical with each other. With respect to those properties essential to divinity, the Persons share those properties. We also shouldn't think of a property like omnipotence as a *way to be divine* but instead as a necessary property for being divine, and this seems quite natural to suppose. What would it mean to be "a proper part of the Trinity" and yet not omnipotent?

¹⁶ Another difference between the Trinity as a whole and the Persons is that only the Trinity is tri-personal, whereas the Persons are not. Since being tri-personal is in itself just what it means to be the Trinity, then tri-personality seems necessary for being an instance of the divine nature as well.

question is not *how* divine the Persons are. They both share the property *d*. It is how dissimilar they are, given that the Persons are proper parts of the Trinity but are not themselves Gods. I have tried to show, just as Moreland and Craig have, that claiming that the Persons and the Trinity are divine in two different ways in no way undermines the worth of the Persons to be worshiped and awed.

Speaking to the other elements of Trinity Monotheism, I find the model both plausible (or more plausible than its alternatives) and remarkably simple. It seems to be in line with the biblical data as well. Howard-Snyder's critique is important because it forces proponents of Moreland and Craig's model to defend and give greater precision and clarification to the model. But this objection, at least, betrays an important misunderstanding of the model, which I hoped to clarify.

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