

His Ways (of Being) Are Not Our Ways

Abstract

I aim to do two things in this paper. First, I offer some criticism of the currently discussed solutions to the problem of the Trinity. Second, I develop and defend a novel solution to the problem of the Trinity, which I call *Trinitarian Ontological Pluralism*. Ontological pluralism holds that there are different ways of being. Put another way, ontological pluralism holds that there are multiple semantically primitive existential quantifiers. Trinitarian ontological pluralism is the view that God exists in two ways. God exists in one way as a unity, and another way as a trinity.

I. Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity, that there are three divine Persons in one being, is seen by many as intellectually scandalous. The doctrine seems, on the face of it, flatly incoherent. In the literature discussing the Trinity, many inventive approaches have been offered that purport to resolve any apparent inconsistency while maintaining theological orthodoxy and philosophical plausibility. In this paper I offer some brief criticism of each of the major views presented in the literature. However, my main task in this paper will be to propose and defend a novel theory of the Trinity, one that I believe to be superior to the others.

In section II I will set up the problem of the Trinity, which will show how adherence to the doctrine can lead to inconsistent beliefs. I will then point out some wrong turns in responding to the problem. These wrong turns lead to heresies such as modalism and polytheism. In sections III and IV I will lay out the major views that are discussed in the literature. I will explain how they attempt to resolve the problem of the Trinity and will offer some brief criticism of each view. In section V I will discuss ontological pluralism, explain how it is applied to the Trinity, and detail some benefits that it has over competing views. Finally, in section VI I will offer some responses to several objections against ontological pluralism as it is applied to the Trinity.

II. The Puzzle

What I call the *Problem of the Trinity* is the claim that the doctrine of the Trinity includes the following claims, but that they are inconsistent.¹

- (T1) The Father is not the Son, the Father is not the Holy Spirit, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit.
- (T2) The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.
- (T3) There is exactly one God.

The inconsistency can be made explicit by translating these sentences into the following formulas in predicate logic.

(TL1) $f \neq s \ \& \ f \neq r \ \& \ s \neq r$

(TL2) $Gf \ \& \ Gs \ \& \ Gr$

(TL3) $\exists x(Gx \ \& \ \forall y(Gy \supset x = y))$

Where f = the Father, s = the Son, r = the Holy Spirit and Gx just in case x is God. TL1 and TL2 are jointly straightforwardly inconsistent with TL3.

So, to avoid incoherence, the Christian seems forced to deny either TL1, TL2, or TL3. But the denial of any of these claims would land one in heresy. The denial of TL1 is the affirmation of the following claim.

(M) $f = s \vee f = r \vee s = r$

Assuming that the Father, Son and Spirit are all and the only members of the Trinity, M holds that there are at most two Persons of the Trinity ('Persons' for short). For instance, the heresy of *Modalism* holds that all three of the disjuncts of M are true and also affirms the truth of TL2 and TL3, which results in a version of strict monotheism.

The denial of TL2 is expressed as follows:

(S) $\sim Gf \vee \sim Gs \vee \sim Gr$

S denies that at least one of the Persons is God. An example of this is *Subordinationism*, which affirms S, TL1, and TL3. Usually either the Son or the Spirit are denied the status of being God in Subordination theories.

The denial of TL3 is the affirmation of the following.

(P) $\forall x(\neg Gx \vee \exists y(Gy \ \& \ x \neq y))$

This entails that either there is no God or there are at least two Gods. As an example, *Polytheism* affirms TL1 and TL2. Moreover, it holds that P is true and that the first disjunct is false, hence there are at least two Gods.²

So, the problem of the Trinity presents a dilemma: on one horn we can accept TL1-TL3. But this leads us to logical incoherence. On the other horn we can reject any one or a combination of TL1-TL3. But any such rejection amounts to heresy. However, this dilemma is a false one, as it presupposes that TL1-TL3 correctly expresses the logical claims made by T1-T3. This is not obviously true. As we shall see in the next section, there are other ways of interpreting T1-T3.

III. Resolving the inconsistency: The Easy Part

Interpreting T1-T3 as TL1-TL3 generates the problem, but there are other ways to interpret T1-T3 so as not to generate any inconsistency. I will present three ways to interpret T1-T3 that have been widely discussed in the literature.

In the philosophical literature on the Trinity, there are roughly three schools of thought. The first is called *Social Trinitarianism*³, the second *Latin Trinitarianism*⁴, and the third, what I will call *Alternative Identity*⁵. There is no universally agreed upon definition offered for any of these three positions on the Trinity. What I will suppose in this paper is that one way of distinguishing these views is by reference to their reply to what I have called the problem of the Trinity.

The Social Trinitarian interpretation is as follows:

$$(ST1) \quad f \neq s \ \& \ f \neq r \ \& \ s \neq r$$

$$(ST2) \quad G_1f \ \& \ G_1s \ \& \ G_1r$$

$$(ST3) \quad \exists x(G_2 \ \& \ \forall y(G_2 \supset x = y))$$

The general Social Trinitarian strategy is to preserve the distinctness of the Persons and give some alternative account to their unity. This strategy can be interpreted as trying to block the inference to contradiction by holding that the God predicated of Father, Son, and Spirit is somehow distinct from the God quantified over in ST3. For instance, most Social Trinitarians will hold that Father, Son, and Spirit are God in that they are divine individuals. However, the God quantified over in ST3 is something that is

somehow apart from the three Persons. This something could be the community had between the three Persons.⁶ Alternatively, it could be something akin to a mereological sum of the three Persons.⁷

The Latin Trinitarian interpretation is as follows:

$$(LT1) \quad F \neq S \ \& \ F \neq R \ \& \ S \neq R$$

$$(LT2) \quad G_f \ \& \ G_s \ \& \ G_r$$

$$(LT3) \quad \exists x(Gx \ \& \ \forall y(Gy \supset x = y))$$

where 'F' is a second order predicate constant denoting the predicate 'is the Father,' 'S' is a second order predicate constant denoting the predicate 'is the Son,' and 'R' is a second-order predicate constant denoting the predicate 'is the Holy Spirit.'" The point to take from LT1 is that "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" no longer denote individuals in the sense typically understood by a Social Trinitarian or someone who affirms TL1-TL3. This can be expressed using second order logic notation as I've stated above, or as a conjunction of negated biconditionals. I chose the former simply for ease of presentation, as the latter would be a mouthful.⁸ The Latin Trinitarian strategy reverses the priority of the Social Trinitarian strategy. According to the Latin Trinitarian, what is first preserved is the unity of the Persons, i.e. that there is just one God. The Latin Trinitarian then proceeds to give an alternate account of the diversity of the Persons of the Trinity. This account interprets 'Father', 'Son', and 'Spirit' differently. Rather than individuals, 'Father', 'Son', and 'Spirit' may refer to something like events, timelines, or "life streams."⁹

The alternative identity interpretation is as follows:

$$(AI1) \quad f \neq_1 s \ \& \ f \neq_1 r \ \& \ s \neq_1 r$$

$$(AI2) \quad G_f \ \& \ G_s \ \& \ G_r$$

$$(AI3) \quad \exists x(Gx \ \& \ \forall y(Gy \supset x =_2 y))$$

Where $a =_1 b$ just in case a and b are the relata of one type of identity relation, and $a =_2 b$ just in case a and b are in another type of identity relation. One type of alternative identity theory is Relative Identity. Relative Identity holds that there is no such thing as strict identity understood primitively. Primitively

speaking, all identity is identity relative to some category, e.g. being the same person, being the same table, etc. According to Relative Identity, AI1 is read as "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." Moreover, AI3 is read as, "There exists an x such that x is God, and for all y, if y is God, then x is the same God as y."

Another account that I consider to fall under the heading of alternative identity involves the use of a notion called "numerical sameness without identity." According to this view, the identity relation used in AI1 is the strict identity traditionally understood. AI3, however, uses this new relation. It reads, "There exists an x such that x is God, and for all y, if y is God, then x is numerically the same, but not identical to y."

If I am correct in associating the three interpretations to their respective philosophical positions, then each position on the problem of the Trinity has a way of interpreting T1-T3 that avoids inconsistency. Avoiding inconsistency was the easy part. Now, each school of thought is faced with the challenge of providing a story that makes their interpretation of T1-T3 both plausible and orthodox. This is the hard part, and the focus of my attention in the next section.

IV. Maintaining Plausibility & Preserving Orthodoxy: The Hard Part

1. Social Trinitarianism

In order to avoid a trip back to inconsistency, social trinitarianism must hold that the entity denoted by the name 'God' is either distinct from the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, or the entity is distinct from two out of three. In other words, God is either a fourth entity along with the three Persons, or God is identical to one of the Persons.

The heresy of polytheism holds that there are at least two Gods, i.e.

(P1) $\exists x \exists y (Gx \ \& \ Gy \ \& \ x \neq y)$

ST1 and ST2 of the social trinitarian interpretation jointly imply P1. Thus, the social trinitarian is in danger of becoming a polytheist. In order to sidestep this pitfall, it seems that the social trinitarian must hold that the predicate 'Gx' in ST2 differs in some way from the predicate 'Gx' in TL2.

The social trinitarian now faces some uncomfortable questions. First, T2 and TL2 claim that the Persons have a godly nature. ST2 also claims that the Persons have a divine nature. But, in order to avoid polytheism, the social trinitarian has to show us that the divine nature posited in ST2 differs from the divine nature given in T2 and TL2. However, orthodoxy holds that all three of the Persons are fully God.¹⁰ What kind of distinction can the social trinitarian make between the two kinds of divine natures that preserves the full divinity of the Persons while avoiding polytheism?

Second, the social trinitarian holds that the entity named 'God' differs from at least two of the Persons. What is the nature of this entity and how does it differ from the Persons? If we hold that the Persons are fully divine and that this entity is also fully divine, then we become polytheists. Again, in order to avoid polytheism, it looks like the social trinitarian must hold that God and the Persons are fully divine in different ways, and the ways in which the Persons are divine are such that they are fully God while at the same time not being God in the way that T2 and TL2 state that the Persons are God. It looks like a lot of work needs to be done before social trinitarianism can be considered both orthodox and coherent.¹¹

2. *Latin Trinitarianism*

The heresy of modalism holds that all three disjuncts of M are true. Replacing TL1 with M and holding that all three disjuncts of M are true amounts to the claim that there is only one divine individual. If latin trinitarianism is committed to the interpretation of T1-T3 given in LT1-LT3, then unless further elaboration is provided, it looks like it is a species of modalism. According to LT1-LT3, there is just one individual, whose name is denoted by the constant 'g.' This individual has three

properties denoted by the predicates, 'x is the Father,' 'x is the Son,' and 'x is the Holy Spirit' respectively.

As a response to this challenge the latin trinitarian could argue that bearing the distinct properties *being the Father, being the Son, and being the Holy Spirit* suffice for there being three Persons while at the same time not entailing that there are three individuals. In other words, she could argue that multiple divine Persons does not imply multiple individuals. There are two problems with this approach. First, if we are to assume that the three Persons exist simultaneously, then it is not clear how such a view is plausible. It seems obviously true that three of anything entails that there are three things simpliciter.¹² Second, this approach leaves one with the difficulty of accounting for Scriptural data, such as in Matthew 3:16,17, i.e. the baptism of Jesus Christ. In this passage, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. When Jesus emerged from the water, he saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove, and heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Assuming that the three actions in this scene, being baptized, descending upon, and speaking, were performed by the Son, the Spirit, and the Father respectively, it is difficult to see how all of the actions could have been performed by a single individual. Thus, it seems that interpreting T1-T3 by fiddling with constants and predicates in the manner that the latin trinitarian does just raises further difficulties that seem intractable.

3. *Alternative Identity*

There are two versions of alternative identity that are employed to resolve the problem of the Trinity. The first is relative identity. Relative identity holds that all statements of identity are relativized to some sortal.¹³ According to relative identity, either there is no strict identity, where strict identity implies that x is identical to y only if for all predicates F, x is F just in case y is F, or strict identity is a derivative notion defined up from relative identity. According to relative identity, '=₁' in AI1 is interpreted as 'is the same Person as.' '=₂' in AI3 is interpreted as 'is the same God as.' Since the

relations held in AI1 and AI3 differ, a contradiction cannot be derived and thus the relative identity theorist avoids inconsistency.

Relative Identity faces one major obstacle. Michael Rea points out that relative identity is committed to anti-realism.¹⁴ In particular, it is an anti-realism about distinctness. How many objects we count will depend on how conceptually rich our language is. The fewer predicates there are in our language, the fewer ways there are to count objects. For instance, a language with fewer predicates might count only 5 Fs, where F is some sortal. A richer language, with more predicates to distinguish objects, may count 10 Fs. There is no fact of the matter as to how many Fs there are. This is straightforwardly incompatible with orthodoxy. According to relative identity, the number of divine Persons will depend on the conceptual richness of our language. An impoverished language may only count one, whereas a rich language may count 15. Orthodoxy holds that there are objectively three divine Persons. The number of Persons does not depend on our wealth of predicates. The same goes for the number of Gods. Orthodoxy holds that there is exactly one God. This is true regardless of what language we employ. In order for relative identity to be a viable solution, it must somehow be able to secure the objective number of Persons and Gods. For instance, it could do this by arguing that there are objective facts of the matter regarding our language, i.e. that there are perhaps objective sortals. Accomplishing this while still preserving relative identity appears to be a non-trivial task.

The second approach to alternative identity is proposed by Michael Rea and Jeffrey Brower.¹⁵ On their account, there is strict identity, understood as a primitive relation, and there is another relation that they call *numerical sameness without identity* (henceforth “NSWOI”). Such a relation is introduced as a potential solution to the puzzles regarding material constitution. According to Rea and Brower, the relationship between a statue and a piece of clay is that of numerical sameness without identity.¹⁶ The statue and the piece of clay are numerically the same entity. When we count material objects, we count the statue and the piece of clay as one material object. However, they are not strictly identical. The

statue and the piece of clay differ with respect to their modal properties. For instance, the clay could have survived being squashed, whereas the statue could not. Rea and Brower claim that the relation of numerical sameness without identity holds between God and each of the Persons. God and the Father are numerically one divine object, while not strictly identical. The same applies to the Son and the Holy Spirit. Rea and Brower also hold that the relation of strict identity holds between the Persons. So, '=₁' in AI1 is interpreted as 'is strictly identical to,' while '=₂' in AI3 is interpreted as 'is numerically the same as, without being strictly identical to.' According to Rea and Brower, AI3 states that there is exactly one divine object, whereas AI1 says that there are three divine Persons.

NSWOI retains the benefits had by adopting relative identity. It has an added advantage over relative identity in that it is not committed to anti-realism. NSWOI preserves strict identity and introduces the primitive numerical sameness without identity relation, both of which are compatible with realism with respect to identity and distinctness. So, NSWOI is not committed to the claim that God's self-identity and the distinctness of the Persons are theory dependent. However, NSWOI faces its own challenges. First, it is not clear that that the view offers a philosophically satisfying solution to the puzzles of material constitution. According to NSWOI, in cases of material constitution the numerical sameness without identity relation holds between a parent substance and an accidental unity. Brower and Rea call this relation *accidental sameness*, which is a species of numerical sameness without identity. So, in cases involving statue and clay, the piece of clay is supposedly the parent substance and the statue is purportedly the accidental unity. Statue and clay are numerically the same material object but not identical. Hence we count one material object in that filled region of space occupied by the statue and the piece of clay. Rea and Brower have not been clear on why something is or is not a parent substance. In the case of statue and clay, the piece of clay, which Brower and Rea identify as the parent substance, has the property of being statue-shaped accidentally, while the statue, which is identified as the accidental unity, has the property of being statue-shaped essentially. Can we safely conclude, then,

that accidentally having any particular shape is sufficient for an object being a parent substance? If so, why? If not, then what qualifies an object as a parent substance? Why not consider the statue to be a parent substance and the piece of clay to be an accidental unity? The statue is accidentally composed of some material, and the piece of clay is essentially composed of some material. So, the statue can survive a replacement of some parts, whereas the piece of clay cannot. This seems to be just as good of a story, and qualifies the statue to be a parent substance, rather than an accidental unity. If this is the case, then in an occupied region of space, there is the clay parent substance that is accidentally the same as a statue, and there is the statue parent substance that is accidentally the same as the piece of clay. If we count different parent substances under NSWOI, and if different parent substances cannot be related by accidental sameness, then it looks like there are two objects in the same filled region of space. If this is so, then Brower and Rea's solution collapses into co-locationism, i.e. the view that there are distinct objects completely filling the same region of space.

So, Brower and Rea have a dilemma. On one hand, they can allow that various sortals can be parent substances. If so, then it looks like we can count multiple objects in the same filled region of space. Thus, their solution is just a version of co-locationism. However, co-locationism does not offer us a solution to the problem of the Trinity. Co-locationism concedes that there are multiple objects filling the same region of space, it does not tell us how there can be just one object. Co-locationism would just state that there are multiple Persons. It does not have the resources to tell us how there could be just one God.

If they deny that various sortals can be parent substances, then they must provide some kind of account that non-arbitrarily distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate parent substances. Doing so may provide some solution to the problem of the Trinity, but then applications to the puzzles of material constitution are limited. For instance, if they accepted the piece of clay as a parent substance, but rejected the statue as one, then they would be committed to the implausible view that while

something survives a change in shape, nothing survives a replacement of material parts. So, it looks like Brower and Rea can either have a useful theory for resolving puzzles of material constitution, or a useful theory for resolving the problem of the Trinity, but not both.

Suppose that Brower and Rea grab hold of the first horn of the dilemma, i.e. that various sortals can be parent substances. They might still claim that this gives a solution to the Problem of the Trinity. Suppose that God is the parent substance and the Persons are accidental unities. The three Persons are numerically distinct from one another, whereas God is numerically the same with each of the Persons. In virtue of this parent substance/accidental unity pairing, we can say that there is one God and three Persons. Two concerns arise. First, from what we've seen above, parent substance/accidental unity pairings hold in virtue of some property held accidentally by the parent substance and essentially by the accidental unity. In virtue of what property does the pairing between God and each Person hold? What property does God have accidentally that the three Persons have essentially? One must provide an answer here that coheres with orthodoxy, and that doesn't look like a trivial task. Second, suppose a property was given in virtue of which the God/Person pairing holds. Then we might ask, why that particular property? Couldn't there be other properties that each of the Persons possesses accidentally and that God possesses essentially? If so, then why not count God and the Persons in that way? The defender of NSWOI must argue that there is only one possible pairing, i.e. that there is no property that each of the Persons possesses accidentally and that God possesses essentially. Needless to say, there is still much more work to be done before NSWOI can be considered a satisfying solution to the Problem of the Trinity.¹⁷

In conclusion, the critique just given of these three general positions highlights certain desiderata to be satisfied by any theory that aspires to give some metaphysical account of the Trinity. First, the view should resolve the apparent inconsistency that arises when we countenance T1-T3. Second, the view should preserve what orthodoxy holds to be monotheism, i.e. that there is one and only one God. Third,

again in keeping with orthodoxy, the view should hold that there are three divine Persons. Fourth, if a view incorporates some philosophical machinery, this machinery should to some degree earn its keep in philosophical theorizing unrelated to the Problem of the Trinity. If such philosophical concepts are not useful or are seen as implausible outside of discussions regarding the Trinity, then the employment of such concepts may be seen as *ad hoc*. In the next section I will propose a theory that I believe satisfies all four desiderata.

V. Ontological Pluralism and the Trinity

The theories of the Trinity that I've discussed in this paper have focused on giving alternate interpretations of the names, predicates and the identity relation. However, these views, and their correlate interpretations of T1-T3, have left one stone unturned. Here I will propose a theory that gives an alternate interpretation of that final stone: the existential quantifier.

The consensus view in metaontological discussion is that the existential quantifier is an operator that, when taken literally, ranges unrestrictedly over everything. Oftentimes, conversational context places restrictions on what the quantifier ranges over, but such restrictions presuppose that initially the quantifier is unrestricted in what it ranges over. Such a semantic theory expresses the view that existence is univocal, i.e. that there is just one way existing, or one mode of being. Call this view *Ontological Monism*. Jason Turner and Kris McDaniel defend a view that rejects this account of there being just one mode of being.¹⁸ The view that they defend is called *Ontological Pluralism*.

According to ontological pluralism, entities exist in different ways. There are different modes of being, so to speak. A common example is that abstracta and concreta seem to have different modes of being. There are several ways of cashing out the thesis that there are different modes of being. First, if we consider existence to be a second order property, then ontological pluralism holds that there are multiple, fundamental existence properties.¹⁹ Roughly speaking, a property is fundamental only if it is not had in virtue of anything else. You might think of these properties as foundational building blocks

for other properties. Second, if we use talk of fundamentality, then ontological pluralism holds that there is more than one fundamental structuring of reality.²⁰ Thus, there are realities that have different types or arrangements of fundamental properties, as well as perhaps different ways in which non-fundamental properties are grounded in the fundamental properties. Finally, ontological pluralism holds that the true theory about the fundamental structure of reality will have multiple, semantically primitive existential quantifiers, i.e. quantifiers that are neither interdefinable nor defined up from a single existential quantifier.²¹ The existential quantifier used in ontological monism will henceforth be called the *Generic Quantifier*. The existential quantifier used in ontological pluralism will be called the *Specific Quantifier*. In ontological pluralism, the generic quantifier can be defined as the disjunction of specific quantifiers.

Why take ontological pluralism to be the correct view over ontological monism? First, the view is attractive to those whose intuitions indicate that things do exist in fundamentally different ways. Turner and McDaniel observe that this intuition was held by notable historical figures, including Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Russell, Moore, and Heidegger.²²

Secondly, ontological pluralism supports the observation that existence is *analogous*. An analogous feature is a feature that is analyzed in terms of something like a disjunction of more specific features that are more natural than the general features. This grouping of specific features is not just a mere disjunction. Rather, there is some kind of unity in this grouping that makes the inclusion of each in the disjunct sensible.²³ For example, *being healthy* is understood as an analogous feature. A person is healthy, a heart is healthy, spinach is healthy, someone's urine is healthy. Each of these statements are true respectively in virtue of the possession of the following properties: *being a flourishing organism*, *being a properly functioning part of an organism*, *being something that contributes to the flourishing of an organism*, *being something that indicates that organism is flourishing*. The property *being healthy* is understood as a disjunction of the foregoing specific properties, and each of these specific properties

are more natural than the property, *being healthy*. Lastly, these specific properties seem related in such a way that their disjunction is no mere random disjunction.

McDaniel argues that existence is an analogous feature.²⁴ Existence is a disjunction of more natural features that are unified by analogy. Some examples of these specific kinds of existence include temporally relativized existence, atemporal existence, being a substance, being an attribute, absolute existence, and conceptually relative existence. If we share McDaniel's intuition that existence is an analogous feature, that ways of existing listed above are more natural than generic existence, then ontological pluralism gives us the right metaphysical grounding for this phenomenon. Existence as a generic feature is analogous because it is not primitive. Instead, it is a disjunction of more fundamental ways of being.

Third, McDaniel notes that ontological pluralism best explains our tendency to treat certain entities as existent entities, while at the same time considering their existence to be different from other existing entities.²⁵ The sorts of entities that McDaniel has in mind are negative spaces such as holes, cracks, and shadows. We think they exist because of the way we treat them. We count them, quantify over them, attribute properties to them, treat them as *relata*, etc. At the same time, we have a strong intuition that the existence that negative entities enjoy is quite different from the existence that "positive" entities like people, tables, and trees enjoy.²⁶ Again, ontological pluralism provides the right kind of metaphysical grounding for these observations by holding that negative spaces have a different mode of being, and are thus quantified over by a different existential quantifier, than positive entities.

If we are convinced of the philosophical merits of ontological pluralism, then we can find that it has a profitable application to the problem of the Trinity. I will call the application of ontological pluralism to the problem of the Trinity, *Trinitarian Ontological Pluralism*. The trinitarian ontological pluralist holds that God exists in different ways, i.e. that God has different modes of being. God exists in one way as a

single divine being. God exists in another way as three divine Persons. The view resolves the threat of inconsistency raised by the Problem of the Trinity. The technical application of ontological pluralism is simple. According to the trinitarian ontological pluralist, T1-T3 are interpreted as follows.

$$\text{OP1} \quad \exists_1 x \exists_1 y \exists_1 z (Gx \ \& \ Gy \ \& \ Gz \ \& \ x \neq y \ \& \ y \neq z \ \& \ x \neq z \ \& \ x=f \ \& \ y=s \ \& \ z=r)$$

$$\text{OP2} \quad \exists_2 x (Gx \ \& \ \forall_2 y (Gy \supset x=y))$$

OP1 states that there exist (according to one way of existing) three Gods (i.e. divine individuals) and that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. OP2 states that there exists (according to another way of existing) exactly one God. In order to block the inconsistency, the trinitarian ontological pluralist holds that one cannot instantiate a quantified formula with entities that are not members of the domain that the aforementioned quantifier ranges over. So, what is assumed with OP1 and OP2 are that the domains associated with \exists_1 and \exists_2 are separate.²⁷ Thus, we cannot instantiate OP2 with members of \exists_1 's domain. This is one way of cashing out the claim that God exists in different ways.

Trinitarian ontological pluralism has certain benefits that its competitors lack. First, trinitarian ontological pluralists can claim to be fully monotheist. There is, literally speaking, one God according to trinitarian ontological pluralism. Of course, the trick is that trinitarian ontological pluralists hold that there is more than one way of interpreting "there is," and under one interpretation, it is true that there is exactly one God. Trinitarian ontological pluralists can agree with Judaism in holding that there is one God, and can explain how Christianity continues the monotheistic tradition. The Christian and the Jew agree that there is one God because they both use the same quantifier that ranges over a domain in which there is exactly one God. Thus, unlike versions of social trinitarianism, trinitarian ontological pluralism faces no difficulty in preserving the orthodox belief that there is exactly one God.

Second, the trinitarian ontological pluralist can likewise claim truly that there are three divine Persons. The latin trinitarian faces the challenge of attributing just enough personhood to each divine Person without going so far as to say that there are three distinct individuals. The trinitarian ontological

pluralist need not concern herself with this delicate balancing act and can say that there are robustly three individuals that are divine Persons. Again, she can claim this by availing herself of a different quantifier, ranging over a different domain, one in which there are exactly three divine Persons. Taking these two considerations together, we can see how ontological pluralism can ground the claim that Christianity is continuous, but also divergent with Judaism. Christianity is continuous with Judaism in holding that there is a quantifier that ranges over a domain in which there is exactly one God.

Christianity diverges with Judaism in holding that there is another quantifier that ranges over a domain in which there are exactly three divine Persons.

Third, unlike relative identity, trinitarian ontological pluralism is a robustly realist theory. What exists or does not exist, and the mode of something's existence, is a theory independent matter. There is some independent fact of the matter as to how many things there are. It is not the case that the trinitarian ontological pluralist is committed to the claim that there are many equally legitimate ways of dividing and sorting domains and quantifiers.²⁸ The trinitarian ontological pluralist believes that the ultimate structure of reality is one in which there are different ways of existing, and provides a theory to best express this structure. As such, trinitarian ontological pluralism is a robust metaphysical thesis, and not just a thesis about how we use the words 'there is.' Thus, trinitarian ontological pluralism is a theory well-equipped to support theorizing about God and the Trinity.

Lastly, with respect to NSWOI, I argued above that the view faces a dilemma. In order for the view to offer a satisfying solution to paradoxes of material constitution, it must allow for different kinds of parent substances. But such a concession limits, if not altogether prohibits, the application of NSWOI to the problem of the Trinity. Likewise, if we were to hold that there is only one, or a perhaps a select few kinds of parent substances, then we could plausibly apply NSWOI to the Problem of the Trinity, but then its application to puzzles of material constitution is less than satisfying. So the NSWOI theorist faces an exclusive disjunct. Either NSWOI is useful for puzzles of material constitution, or it is useful for the

problem of the Trinity, but not both. Trinitarian ontological pluralism faces no such dilemma. There is no ambiguity about the multiple semantically primitive quantifiers that threatens to limit its application to both philosophical and theological problems. In fact, McDaniel notes that the use of ontological pluralism, or at least talk of different ways of being, is already present in theological literature. Particularly, McDaniel observes that Aquinas held that God exists in a manner that is radically different from the way that we exist.²⁹ Applications of ontological pluralism to philosophical or theological issues require very little adjustment. As such, the theory demonstrates itself to be very fruitful in a variety of contexts, and this is one more point in favor of it. It is not merely an *ad hoc* theory cooked up to resolve the problem of the Trinity.

All in all, it seems to me that trinitarian ontological pluralism has a leg up on its competitors. That said, no theory is beyond reproach. In the next section, I will address a few of what I consider to be the most forceful objections against trinitarian ontological pluralism.

VI. Objections

Ontological pluralism, taken in itself, might be seen as a weird view, and there are a good number of objections leveled against it. Jason Turner, in his article, "Ontological Pluralism," addresses these objections much more forcefully than I could, so I refer the reader to his excellent article.³⁰ What I will attempt to do in this section is to address objections that one might have against trinitarian ontological pluralism.

1. Trinitarian ontological pluralism entails polytheism (or modalism)

Trinitarian ontological pluralism claims that under one way of being, there are three divine Persons, and under another way of being, there is one God. Isn't this a polytheistic view? Well, it depends on how we understand polytheism. As I stated above in section II, polytheism claims that there are at least two Gods. Trinitarian ontological pluralism, in claiming that there are exactly three divine Persons, implies that there are at least two Gods. The difference here is that the polytheistic thesis employs the

generic existential quantifier, whereas the thesis held by trinitarian ontological pluralism uses a specific existential quantifier. Does this make any difference? Well, it depends on what we take polytheism to be.

There are two ways of interpreting the polytheistic claim using specific existential quantifiers. According to the first, polytheism holds that there are at least two Gods in every domain that every specific quantifier ranges over. In other words, under every mode of being, there are at least two Gods. According to the second, polytheism holds that there are at least two Gods in at least one domain that a specific quantifier ranges over, i.e. that there are at least two Gods under at least mode of being. Trinitarian ontological pluralism does not entail polytheism under the first interpretation, but it does entail polytheism under the second interpretation. So, should we adopt the second interpretation? Perhaps, but notice what follows from this. If polytheism is understood as the claim that there is more than one God under at least one mode of being, then in rejecting polytheism, we are committed to the claim that there is at most one God under every mode of being. Thus, we must either embrace modalism simpliciter or hold that the Persons of the Trinity are not divine in the same way as God is divine, i.e. that there is just one God and three Persons who are not quite God.³¹ Notice that if polytheism were interpreted in the first way, simply rejecting the view would potentially land you in another heresy. There would be little room to maneuver. So, if one were to adopt the second interpretation of polytheism as an objection to trinitarian ontological pluralism, then everyone else will be in a worse situation. Thus, I think it is more plausible to interpret polytheism in the first way. If we adopt the second interpretation of polytheism, then the trinitarian ontological pluralist can reject polytheism.

We can employ the same approach, *mutatis mutandis*, to modalism. Whether or not trinitarian ontological pluralism entails modalism depends on how we interpret modalism. Under one interpretation, where there is only one God under every mode of being, trinitarian ontological pluralism

does not entail modalism. Under another, where there is only one God under at least one mode of being, trinitarian ontological pluralism does entail modalism. However, if we take the second interpretation, then rejecting modalism entails that either we embrace polytheism or we somehow radically redefine what we mean by 'one God'. Again, this is unattractive, and thus it is inadvisable to adopt the second interpretation.

2. *Ontological pluralism is just a version of relative identity*

Ontological pluralism and relative identity use some similar sounding language. Ontological pluralists might claim that some individual exists in one way but does not exist in another way. Relative identity theorists claim that identity holds under one sortal, but not under another. It seems like the two theories might be intertranslatable. To say that an object exists in one way but not the other might be to say that, under a generic quantifier, an object is identical to something under one sortal and not identical to anything under another. If this is true, then it seems that ontological pluralism is just a mere notational variant of relative identity.

Turner forcefully addresses this objection in his article "Logic and Ontological Pluralism." I will not go through all of the technical details here, but will just provide a very brief summary. Turner argues that since certain inferences are valid under ontological pluralism but not under ontological monism, and vice versa, the two views are not mere notational variants.³² Since the translation between ontological pluralism and relative identity requires the intertranslatability between ontological pluralism and ontological monism, ontological pluralism and relative identity are not equivalent views. One can be an ontological pluralist and either accept or reject relative identity. In this case, to be both an ontological pluralist and a relative identity theorist would be to hold that under at least one, or all domains, identity between members of the domain is relative to a sortal.

3. *Trinitarian ontological pluralism is weird (The incredulous stare)*

Some might balk at trinitarian ontological pluralism, mainly because it is unusual and counterintuitive in its treatment of quantifiers. However, this objection smacks of pot to kettle-style accusation. Consider the playing field. We have one view that takes identity as relative, another that claims that the Persons are numerical the same as, but not identical with, some divine "matter," another that explains the Trinity by analogy to time-travelling Rockettes, another that takes each divine Person to be a part of the whole in a manner similar to that of each dog-head being a part of Cerberus as a whole³³, and another that explains divine unity as some form of cooperation between omnipotent entities³⁴. The point here is that every view is counterintuitive to some extent, and that trinitarian ontological pluralism is no worse off in this respect. In fact, I think that trinitarian ontological is *more* intuitive than its competitors. It seems very intuitive to hold that God exists in a manner that is radically different from the way we exist. What better way to ground this intuition than to claim that God enjoys different modes of being? This seems to be a better way of capturing the divine mystery, rather than trying to box God in with analogies that are at best limited in increasing our understanding.

VII. Conclusion

In this paper I hope to have shown that trinitarian ontological pluralism is, if not a compelling view, at least a view worth serious consideration. I believe that ontological pluralism is a promising view with many potential applications in philosophical theology, as well as other areas in first-order metaphysics. The view is well worth exploring and may help lead us to new insights on the nature of God and the nature of reality.

¹ These three claims are derived from the Athanasian Creed, which has been used as the standard source text on the Trinity by discussants in the literature. See the following website for a formulation of the creed.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/quicumque.html>

² *Tritheism* is a species of polytheism. Tritheism claims that there are exactly three Gods.

³ Proponents of social trinitarianism include William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), chap. 29; Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), chap. 8; Edward Wierenga, "Trinity and Polytheism," *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004):281-294.

⁴ The only contemporary defender of latin trinitarianism that I am aware of is Brian Leftow, "A Latin Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004):204-33.

⁵ The phrase "alternative identity" doesn't appear in any of the literature that I've come across. I coin the phrase as a catch-all to include relative identity accounts of the Trinity as well as material constitution accounts. For a relative identity account of the Trinity, see Peter van Inwagen, "And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God" in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. T. Morris (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 241-278. For a material constitution account, see Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea, "Material Constitution and the Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005):57-76.

⁶ See Swinburne, (1994).

⁷ See Craig and Moreland, (2003).

⁸ I prefer to express LT1 with second order predicates because I take the would-be differences between such predicates to be hyperintensional differences. Hence, such differences could not be expressed as a difference of set membership across possible worlds. I take the difference between F and S to be hyperintensional because I assume that the predicates 'is the Father' and 'is the Son' have one member across all possible worlds, namely, God. This seems to me a reasonable assumption. However, nothing hangs on this formulation. If it turns out that the differences between predicates are intensional or extensional, then a formulation using negated biconditionals would also be fine, since that would also block the inference to a contradiction.

⁹ See Leftow, (2004).

¹⁰ See the Athanasian Creed. "So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; And yet they are not three Gods, but one God."

¹¹ See Brian Leftow, "Anti-Social Trinitarianism" in *The Trinity*, eds. S. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203-249, for criticism along the same lines. See also Jeffrey Brower, "The Problem with Social Trinitarianism: A Reply to Wierenga" *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004):295-303; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Trinity Monotheism" *Philosophia Christi* 5 (2003):375-403; Dale Tuggy, "Tradition and Believability: Edward Wierenga's Social Trinitarianism" *Philosophia Christi* 5 (2003):447-456, for additional criticism of social trinitarianism.

¹² Leftow attempts to support the claim that three Persons does not entail three individuals by making an analogy to time travel. See his *Latin Trinity*. According to Leftow, in a situation in which a person travels back in time and interacts with her past self, we are faced with an ambiguity of counting. According to the time traveler's personal clock, there is just one individual. According to the public clock, there are two individuals. He uses this as an analogy for the simultaneous existence of the Persons. Each person inhabits an eternal "event-stream," where each stream is somehow causally connected to the others. However, it is far from clear that he has succeeded in showing that his account preserves both unity and diversity. He seems either committed to saying that all three streams are causally related, thus entailing that there is just one stream, or that the three streams are not causally related, but not both. When I cross an S-shaped road three times, I still just crossed one road.

¹³ The most famous defense of relative identity is Peter Geach, "Identity" *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967):3-12.

¹⁴ See Rea, "Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity" *Philosophia Christi* 5 (2003):431-46.

¹⁵ See Brower and Rea, *Material Constitution*.

¹⁶ More specifically, statue and clay are related by accidental sameness, which is a species of numerical sameness without identity.

¹⁷ See William Lane Craig, "Does the Problem of Material Constitution Illuminate the Doctrine of the Trinity?" *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005):77-86; William Hasker, "Constitution and the Trinity: The Brower-Rea Proposal" *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010):321-329; Christopher Hughes "Defending the Consistency of the Doctrine of the Trinity" in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, eds. T. McCall and M. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 293-313; Alexander Pruss, "Brower and Rea's Constitution Account of the Trinity" in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, eds. T. McCall and M. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 314-325, for additional criticism of NSWOI.

¹⁸ See McDaniel, "Ways of Being" in *Metametaphysics* eds. D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 290-319; "A Return to the Analogy of Being" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming), <http://krmcdani.mysite.syr.edu/RAB.pdf>; "Being and Almost Nothingness" *Nous* (forthcoming) <http://krmcdani.mysite.syr.edu/BAANWEB.pdf>, and Turner, "Ontological Pluralism" *The Journal of Philosophy* 107 (2010).1:5-34; "Logic and Ontological Pluralism" *The Journal of Philosophical Logic* (forthcoming) http://www.personal.leeds.ac.uk/~phljtt/jason_turner/papers_files/L-OP%285%29.pdf.

¹⁹ McDaniel, *Analogy*, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ Turner, *Ontological Pluralism*, pp. 6-8.

²¹ McDaniel, *Ways of Being*, pp. 302-305. Turner *Ontological Pluralism*, pp. 6-8.

²² Turner, *Ontological Pluralism*, fn. 1-3. McDaniel, *Ways of Being*, *passim*.

²³ McDaniel, *Analogy*, pp.5-6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Section 4.

²⁵ McDaniel, *Almost Nothingness*.

²⁶ McDaniel calls the sort of being had by negative spaces "being-by-courtesy." See *Almost Nothingness*, p. 2.

²⁷ Could there be an overlapping of the domains of specific quantifiers? Such an overlapping would present a threat to this solution if God were a member of the intersection of \exists_1 and \exists_2 . I don't have any arguments to offer

against such a possible overlapping other than to point at that cases that typically involve multiple domains, such as concreta and abstracta, don't seem to overlap.

²⁸ This view typically goes by the name of *quantifier variance* and is most forcefully defended in Eli Hirsch, *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁹ See McDaniel *Analogy*, pp. 3-4 and fn. 18.

³⁰ Turner, *Ontological Pluralism*.

³¹ Or, if the social trinitarian succeeds, the Persons can have a sort of property that makes them divine but not Gods.

³² Turner, *Logic*, section 2.

³³ See Craig & Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations*, chap. 29.

³⁴ See Swinburne, *Christian God*, chap. 8.