Article

Divine Simplicity, Divine Relations, and the Problem of Robust Persons

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Abstract: In this paper, I aim to defend a robust concept of “person” as it relates to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. I begin by situating the debate in the current context between Social Trinitarianism (ST) and Latin Trinitarianism (LT) and then zero in on Thomas Aquinas’s view of the divine Persons as subsistent relations. I will argue that such an understanding of divine Persons has two significant difficulties. First, Aquinas’s view of a strong doctrine of divine simplicity is susceptible to modal collapse. For on such a view, there are no real distinctions within God; such distinctions are conceptually only. If there are no real distinctions within God, then how can we make sense of the eternal relations within God? Second, I question whether a relation can be equated with a Person. After all, relations do not know things, perform actions, or love in the way Scripture portrays the divine Persons. I will then offer a constructive and more robust view of the divine Person—one that aligns with the control of Scripture. In doing so, I consider two objections, one centering on whether defenders of ST fall into tri-theism and the other on whether divine Persons can indeed work together.

Keywords: divine relations; divine simplicity; Social Trinitarianism (ST)

1. The Threeness-Oneness Problem

There is perhaps no more perplexing doctrine in Christianity than the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet, the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the Christian faith. It is the very doctrine that sets Christian theism apart from other monotheistic models of God, since Christians are committed to the belief that God is a tri-unity of persons, unlike other monotheists who believe that God is only one person (unitarian). But what makes the Trinity such a perplexing doctrine? What exactly is the problem?

The problem has been coined as the “threeness-oneness problem,” or to put it another way: given monotheism, how is it that God is both one and three? After all, Orthodox Christianity affirms and requires each of the following claims:

(1) The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God,
(2) The Divine Persons are not each Other,
(3) Yet, there is only one God.

As the Athanasian Creed puts it, “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.” In other words, Christian orthodoxy requires the distinctness and divinity of the persons and yet affirms that God is one (McCall 2010, p. 11).

2. Trinitarian Models

In recent years, a variety of models competed to provide a coherent understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, seeking to make sense of the “threeness-oneness” problem, but two stand out—Social Trinitarianism (ST) and Latin Trinitarianism (LT). But even within each approach, there persists a variety of models. Despite this, each approach maintains its own core commitments, which set the two approaches apart from one another.
2.1. Latin Trinitarianism

Defenders of LT claim to follow a long tradition within Western Christian thought, placing emphasis on the Trinity as consisting of only one divine being or substance. Historically, LT has been the view of such high-profile thinkers as Augustine, Boethius, Anslem, and Aquinas, and in more recent years defended by Brian Leftow (2009a, 2009b) and various others. A clear affirmation of LT can be found in such creeds as the Athanasian Creed and Creed of the Council of Toledo.

As Leftow puts it, “God constitutes three Persons, but all three are at bottom just God” (Leftow 2009b, p. 52). For Leftow, the persons “contain no constituent distinct from God” and they are “somehow God three times over,” which he takes the Athanasian Creed to confirm (Leftow 2009a, p. 171). Here Leftow follows Aquinas, who says the following: “In creatures the one generate has not the same nature numerically as the generator, but another nature, numerically distinct, which commences to exist in it anew by generation, and ceases to exist by corruption, and so it is generated and corrupted accidentally; whereas God begotten has the same nature numerically as the begetter” (Aquinas 2007, p. 198).

To understand Aquinas on this point, Leftow resorts to a discussion on tropes, which are individualized cases of attributes. Take, for example, Cain and Abel. Both were human, both had the same nature of humanity, yet each had his own distinct nature. How is that? When Cain killed Abel, Abel ceased to live, while Cain continued to persist. What this shows is that while they shared the same generic human nature, each had his own distinct trope of human nature. But that is not how it is with divine Persons. The Persons of the Trinity do not have their own individualized case of deity or divine nature (trope). “While Cain’s humanity ≠ Abel’s humanity,” says Leftow, “the Father’s deity = the Son’s deity = God’s deity” (Leftow 2009a, p. 172). So, on LT there is assuredly only one God, but the question remains: how are we to make sense of the Persons being three? I will return to this question below. Now, shall we consider Social Trinitarianism?

2.2. Social Trinitarianism

Social Trinitarianism is all the rage these days, defended by such individuals as Jürgen Moltmann (1993), David Brown (1985), Cornelius Plantinga (1989), Richard Swinburne (1994), Stephen Davis (2016), William Hasker (2017), and William Lane Craig (2009). Defenders of ST affirm that the Persons of the Trinity exist as a “society” or “community” of sorts (though some defenders prefer something more akin to “society-like” or “community-like”), and they aim to take the concept of divine Person in the most robust way possible. Often ST defenders take the notion of “person” as it applies to the divine Persons in the modern sense of the term. Each divine Person has something like a distinct center of consciousness or a distinct mind and will. This stands in contrast to LT models that focus on God as having one divine mind and will in some sense shared by the divine Persons (i.e., Relations). When defenders of ST refer to “God,” they mean either one of the divine Persons or they mean something more like “the Godhead” (Davis 2016, p. 61).

But what exactly is the sine qua non of this view? Michael Rea and Thomas McCall lay out the following core tenets of ST:

(ST1) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are “of one essence,” but are not numerically the same substance. Rather, the divine persons are consubstantial only in the sense that they share the divine nature in common. Furthermore, this sharing of a common nature can be understood in a fairly straightforward sense via the “social analogy” in which Peter, James, and John share human nature.

(ST2) Properly understood, the central claim of monotheism that there is but one God is to be understood as the claim that there is one divine nature—not as the claim that there is exactly one divine substance.

(ST3) The divine persons must each be in full possession of the divine nature and in some particular relation R to one another for Trinitarianism to count as monotheism. (McCall and Rea 2009, p. 3)
While the above tenets do capture the essence of some Social Trinitarians, not all defenders of ST would be happy with such a designation, especially since certain models want to affirm something stronger than the persons sharing a generic or abstract kind essence. William Hasker suggests that defenders of ST (and critics alike) should consider the more modest proposal of Cornelius Plantinga, whereby he defines Social Trinitarianism in the following way:

By strong or social trinitarianism, I mean a theory that meets at least the following three conditions: (1) The theory must have Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action. Since each of these capacities requires consciousness, it follows that in this sort of theory, Father, Son, and Spirit would be viewed as distinct centers of consciousness or, in short, as persons in some full sense of that term. (2) Any accompanying sub-theory of divine simplicity must be modest enough to be consistent with condition (1), that is, with the real distinctness of trinitarian persons. (3) Father, Son, and Spirit must be regarded as tightly enough related to each other so as to render plausible the judgment that they constitute a particular social unit. In such social monotheism, it will be appropriate to use the designator God to refer to the whole Trinity, where the Trinity is understood to be one thing, even if it is a complex thing consisting of persons, essences, and relations. (Plantinga 1989, p. 22)

Hasker takes (1) to be the most important condition, which becomes the primary principle for his own formulation of ST. (2) is necessary for logical consistency, limiting any commitments that would contradict (1). Finally, condition (3) is the final aim of all ST models, whether they succeed in showing that there is, indeed, only one God or not. Hasker points out two advantages of Plantinga’s ST formula. First, he says, “the insistence that Father, Son, and Spirit are persons in some full sense of the term’ leaves it open that the term can legitimately have a variety of senses, and thus allows (though it does not require) the recognition of an analogical element in the use of ‘person” (Hasker 2017, p. 23). Secondly, such a model does not require one to hold to the persons as sharing merely an “abstract essence.” Though Plantinga himself took the persons as sharing something of a generic unity when it comes to the oneness of God, defenders of ST could posit the persons as having “a numerically identical concrete nature” on such a proposal, which we shall return to below (Hasker 2017, p. 23).

3. Aquinas on Simplicity, Persons, and Relations

Having laid the foundation for the debate, how ought we to understand divine Persons? In much of Christian Tradition, the notion of a divine Person has landed on taking Them to be different relations within God. This was certainly Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the divine Persons. Because of his understanding of divine simplicity, immutability, and timelessness, Aquinas denied any real relations in God to the creatures, though, of course, creatures are really related to God because creatures are contingent and depend on God for their being. Yet, with respect to the divine processions within God, Aquinas affirmed the persons are really related (Aquinas 2007, p. 152). To flesh this out, it would first be helpful to consider Aquinas’s view of divine simplicity and what he means by “relations”.

3.1. Divine Simplicity and Divine Relations

Strikingly, other than John 4:24, which tells us “God is Spirit”, and the “I Am” passage of Exodus 3:14, Aquinas gives no other biblical support in the Summa Theologica for his conclusions on divine simplicity (Aquinas 2007, pp. 15, 70). The doctrine comes first in his exposition of the divine perfections, followed by his discussion on and defense of the existence of God. It is clear from the Summa Theologica that Aquinas took God to be “altogether simple” (Aquinas 2007, p. 19). By this he means that God is not composed of parts, nor is he composed of any form and matter. Furthermore, God’s nature is indistinct
from His \textit{suppositum}, nor does his essence differ from His existence. Because God is \textit{actus purus} (pure act), God is without any potential and free from accident.

Regarding the divine attributes, Aquinas takes it that there are no real distinctions between them. The doctrine of divine simplicity excludes any composition or accident in God. “[W]hatever is attributed of God,” says Aquinas, “is His essence Itself” (Aquinas 2007, p. 204). So in this sense, God’s wisdom and power, say, are not really distinct within God but are the same, because both belong to the divine essence. Aquinas distinguishes between “logical” relations and “real” relations. Logical relations are found only within “the apprehension of reason” and “not in reality” (Aquinas 2007, p. 151). Real relations, on the other hand, require “real opposition,” which by nature “includes distinction” (Aquinas 2007, p. 153). Because of the doctrine of divine simplicity, the divine attributes are only logically related to one another. There are no real distinctions among them within the divine essence. Instead, any distinctions are merely conceptual or apprehended by reason.

3.2. Divine Persons and Divine Processions

Unlike the divine attributes, Aquinas maintains that the divine Persons are really related. Aquinas saw the need to defend the notion of real relations within God to avoid heresy. Otherwise, he says, “if the relations were not really distinguished from each other, there would be no real Trinity in God, but only an ideal trinity, which is the error of Sabellius” (Aquinas 2007, p. 151).

There is, however, no distinction between divine personal properties and the Persons (Thom 2012, p. 131). On this, he explains,

For personal properties are the same as the persons because the abstract and the concrete are the same in God; since they are the subsisting persons themselves, as paternity is the Father Himself, and filiation is the Son, and procession is the Holy Ghost. But the non-personal properties are the same as the persons according to the other reason of identity, whereby whatever is attributed to God is His own essence. (Aquinas 2007, p. 204)

What, then, are the personal properties? None other than the divine relations themselves. Following Aristotle, Aquinas recognizes that every relation is based either on quantity or on action. Since there is no quantity in God, any real relation in God must be based on divine actions. These actions cannot be extrinsic to God but must be internal to the divine nature, which he takes to be found in the divine processions and relations of origin—paternity, filiation, and spiration.

Aquinas defines a person as “an individual substance of a rational nature,” which he borrows from Boethius (Aquinas 2007, p. 156). He realizes, however, that this definition of “person” raises a problem. Instead of signifying a relation, it would seem to signify nature only. But this should not pose a threat, since “something may be included in the meaning of a less common term, which is not included in the more common term (Aquinas 2007, p. 159). He continues, “It is one thing to ask the meaning of this word \textit{person} in general; and another to ask the meaning of \textit{person} as applied to God. For \textit{person} in general signifies the individual substance of a rational figure. The individual in itself is undivided, but is distinct from others. Therefore, \textit{person} in any nature signifies what is distinct in that nature” (Aquinas 2007, p. 159). In the case of God, however, “person signifies a relation as subsisting... and such a relation is a hypostasis subsisting in the divine nature” (Aquinas 2007, p. 159).

3.3. Difficulties with Thomistic Persons

What shall we make of the Thomistic notion of persons and divine relations? First, it seems that Aquinas wants to have his cake and eat it too. On the one hand, Aquinas wants to say there are no real distinctions in God; yet he cannot help but claim real distinctions when it comes to the Persons. Otherwise, as he’s rightly noted, to deny real distinctions between the Persons lands one knee-deep in the heresy of Sabellianism. But recall an earlier quote from Aquinas makes the following claim, “But the non-personal properties
are the same as the persons according to the other reason of identity, whereby whatever 
is attributed to God is His own essence” (Aquinas 2007, p. 204). While Aquinas wants 
to make it clear that there are real distinctions between the Father, Son, and Spirit, it 
seems he also wants to say that each of the Persons is identical with the non-personal 
properties of the divine essence. This raises a significant problem based on the principle 
of the “Indiscernibility of Identicals,” which suggests that identity is reflexive, transitive, 
and symmetric:

For any object x and y, if x and y are identical, then for any property P, x has P if 
and only if y has P. (McCall 2021, p. 159)

If each of the Persons is identical with the divine essence, this just entails that the 
Persons are identical to one another (McCall 2014, p. 57). This raises a further problem 
since a core tenet of orthodox Trinitarianism demands that the Persons remain distinct. But 
if the Persons are identical to one another, then in what sense can we speak of the Trinity? 
It would seem we are left with something more akin to Unitarianism.

Granted, as Nicholas Wolterstorff and others have shown, there is a difference between 
“constituent” and “relational” ontology (Wolterstorff 2010, p. 100). In relational ontology, a 
substance is a concrete entity that exemplifies certain properties. In this case, God would be 
a substance who is a property bearer. Constituent ontology, on the other hand, takes it that 
that a substance possesses accidents (i.e., attributes) as its constituents. Medieval theologians 
held to constituent ontology with respect to their understanding of God. But as Oliver 
Crisp reminds us, as enlightening as such a distinction is, it still does not settle the main 
points of dispute. On this he writes, “Claiming that God is unique in having no accidents, 
including no distinct attributes essentially, appears question beginning.” (Crisp 2019, p. 565) 
He continues, “Moreover, how is God said to be wholly non-composite, that is without 
any parts whatsoever, if he has real distinctions that pertain to the divine persons of the 
Trinity?” To claim that there are these distinctions within God, without division, will not 
do, “since real distinctions are metaphysically impossible” in the kind of simple being that 
Aquinas and his followers envision (Crisp 2019, pp. 565–66).

Beyond the problem of identity, there is also another connected difficulty related to 
Aquinas’s view of divine simplicity as it bears on the doctrine of the Trinity and divine 
Persons—the problem of modal collapse. As mentioned earlier, Aquinas gives no significant 
biblical support for the doctrine of divine simplicity, other than Exodus 3:14 and John 4:24, 
which the John passage claims that “God is Spirit.” But even here, it is not at all clear that 
these passages demand the doctrine of divine simplicity, especially the radical kind of 
doctrine espoused by Aquinas. Others like Steven Duby have attempted to ground the 
doctrine exegetically and theologically in such passages that speak of (1) God’s divine 
singularity and oneness (e.g., Dt 6:4; Jn 5:20, 44; 17:3; 1 Cor 8:6); (2) divine life and aseity 
(Ex 3:14; 33:19; Rom 9:1–7; (3) divine immutability (Num 23:16; Mal 3:6; Js 1:17); (4) divine 
infinity (Job 5:9; 9:10; 11:7–9; 1 Kgs 8:27; Ps 145:3; Is 40:12–14, 26; 66:1–2; Acts 17:28; 
Col 1:17); and (5) creation ex nihilo (Gen 1:1; Ps 33:6; Acts 17:24; Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Heb 
11:3; Rev 4:11) (Duby 2016, pp. 91–177). But even here, while such efforts ought to be 
commended, it is not at all clear how these doctrines land us with Aquinas’s strong notion 
of simplicity.

But lack of biblical support alone should not call for a rejection of the doctrine, nor 
should one reject it because it is a product of Greek philosophy, as some have been prone 
to do. What should call for concern, however, is whether such a strong doctrine of divine 
simplicity conflicts with other core doctrines of the Christian faith. This is where we find 
ourselves in trouble. Central to Christian teaching are the beliefs that God is free and that 
God created the world ex nihilo. But if the strong doctrine of divine simplicity is the case, 
then it is not at all secure that we can maintain the belief that God is free and the Creator of 
the world. As R. T. Mullins (2013) has shown, the doctrine of divine simplicity classically 
understood leads to modal collapse. According to Aquinas, God is pure actuality, which 
means there can be no potency within God. God has no accidental properties. However, 
affirming God’s freedom raises a significant dilemma for the defender of the strong doctrine
of simplicity. To say that God is free means there is “unactualized potential” in God, since God may have refrained from creating the world in the first place, or He could have created a completely different universe (Mullins 2013, p. 194). But if God is a pure act, as Aquinas and other classical theists maintain, God only had one option—to create this world. He could not have done otherwise since His actions are identical to His being. It would then seem that God is not free.

There is, however, another problem from modal collapse, as Mullins reminds us. If divine simplicity leads to a denial of divine freedom, then modal collapse from such a doctrine undermines the doctrine of God’s aseity, making God dependent upon creation—something defenders of divine simplicity seek to avoid! If that is the case, in what sense can we distinguish the God of Christian theism from the God of panentheism (Mullins 2013, p. 197)?

I have not here done justice to Mullins’s argument, only providing something like a brief sketch of it. But if something like what Mullins proposes is the case, then it is a devastating critique of the classical doctrine of divine simplicity. Much of Aquinas’s view of the divine person as a relation hinges on the doctrine of divine simplicity. But as we have just argued, modal collapse lands the Trinitarian in deep waters. That, taken with the identity problem, would seem that the doctrine of the Trinity collapses upon itself. We are left with something like Modalism after all, whereby we cannot make heads nor tails of the distinctions among the divine Persons.

William Lane Craig levels yet another charge against the Thomistic view of divine Persons. In what sense, Craig asks, “can a person be equated with a relation” (Craig 2009, p. 91)? He continues, “Relations do not cause things, know truths, or love people in a way the Bible says God does. Moreover, to think that the intentional objects of God’s knowing Himself and loving Himself constitute in any sense really distinct persons is wholly implausible” (Craig 2009, p. 91).

4. Toward a More Robust Understanding of Person

If we are not to take the Persons merely as relations, then what? In what follows I want to argue that defenders of ST have it right with respect to how we ought to understand divine Persons. Scripture lends to the idea that the Persons themselves do have something like discrete centers of consciousness or discrete minds and wills and that they are agents who carry out certain intentions, and so forth.

Below I provide a model for ST, but for now, I would only like to say a few preliminary remarks. Not all models of ST are on par with one another. Anyone aiming to develop a model of the Trinity should attempt to capture the best elements from both Latin and Social models and should aim to have as strong of notion of unity as possible. One such promising attempt on the LT side is Scott Williams’s (2013, 2017) Latin Social model. On the ST side, a few promising models include Moreland and Craig’s (2017) Trinitarian Monotheism, Stephen Davis’s (2016) Perichoretic Monotheism, and William Hasker’s (2017) ST model. Each model aims to not only defend what I shall call “robust” persons, but each model aims to ground the Trinity in one concrete substance of being. Furthermore, ST models need not deny the doctrine of divine simplicity—only the stronger versions espoused by Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas—nor do they need to deny the divine relations, processions, or the eternal generation of the Son. Granted, if one holds to the belief that God is everlastingly eternal, then doctrines like the eternal generation of the Son raise other thorny issues that the defender of ST will need to flesh out.2

One key distinction between LT models and ST models is the location of the mind and will. LT models want to locate them within nature, while ST models want to locate them in the divine Persons. So, beyond, limiting personal properties to divine relations, we might say on ST models that personal properties should also include the mind and the will.

So, why should we think that the persons include something like a mind and a will? It seems to me that we have the control of Scripture on our side. Below I will seek to sketch this out by considering some key passages.
Beyond what we see at Christ’s baptism (Mt 3:16–17), whereby each of the persons is present, we find notable instances of the I-Thou relationship that explicitly distinguish the Father and Son from one another (Peckham 2021, p. 218). In Matthew 26:39 Jesus prays, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (ESV) Here we clearly see a distinction between the Father’s will and the Son’s. Moreover, John 17:5 shows not only Christ’s preexistence but that he shared glory with the Father before the world began. Likewise in John 17:24–26, Jesus speaks of the eternal love the Father shared with Him before creation. He also speaks of “knowing” the Father and “desiring” His followers to know Him as He does. Perhaps the defender of anti-ST will employ the *qua* move and say these passages only refer to Christ with respect to His humanity, not His deity. I would not disagree that there are instances where it is appropriate to employ the *qua* move, such as Matthew 24:36; however, it seems beyond credulity to apply it here, specifically because the Son refers to His preexistent state. It is in this preexistent state that He “knows” the Father and that the Father “loved” and “shared glory” with him before creation.

John 17:5, 24–26 is reminiscent of the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2, whereby the Son, who being in the very nature God “made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant.” The action of the Son’s “making himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant” refers to His pre-incarnate state and status, before his “being made in human likeness.” Contextually, Paul’s reason for pointing to Christ is to provide his readers with an example of what it means to look out for the interest of others. Christ is our exemplar of what it means to practice humility and to give up oneself to serve the other. But all this begs an important question with respect to the incarnation. If we are to understand the divine persons as relations, how can a relation “make himself nothing,” or “take on the form of a servant,” or “humble himself”?

In *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, William Hasker argues convincingly that the Fathers often appealed to the I/Thou language of the Son and Father to guard against heretical teachings, such as Patripassianism. The sufferings of Christ, they claimed, belong to the Son of God and not to God the Father. Hasker’s point: we must be careful not to hijack the I/Thou language of Scripture to distinguish between the Son and Father only when it is convenient to guard our position against heretical views. A consistent reading of the I/Thou language between the Father and Son lends toward something more akin to the ST models that suggest “mind” and “will” should be included among the personal properties of the divine Persons (Hasker 2017, p. 71).

Beyond passages that speak of the distinction between the Son and Father, there are also compelling reasons to think that the Father and Spirit have distinct minds. And in such cases, we cannot appeal to the “qua” move. In 1 Corinthians 2:10–11, we find the following:

> . . .these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (ESV)

Beyond giving us a look into first-century psychology, Paul tells us something significant about the inner life of the Triune God, namely that the Spirit reveals God (which is often the Pauline designator for “the Father”) to us, but even more strikingly that the Spirit Himself searches the “depths of God” and that the Spirit “comprehends the thoughts” of the Father.

Paul says something similar in Romans 8:27:

> And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:27, ESV)

In this case, the “he who searches” is in reference to God the Father, and it is the Father who “knows the mind of the Spirit.” Moreover, Paul tells us that the Spirit “intercedes” on behalf of the saints in accordance with the will of God the Father. Regarding this passage,
Richard Longenecker suggests that the Spirit Himself is translating our prayers to the Father as He intercedes on our behalf (Longenecker 2016, pp. 734–35).

Some in the Christian tradition have denied the distinctive personal nature, or as Hodgson put it, “the he-ness” of the Spirit (Hodgson 1944, p. 111). But Scripture demonstrates clearly the personal characteristics of the Holy Spirit. John Peckham lists the following:

- Shares the “name” with the Father and the Son (Matt. 28:19; cf. Exod. 23:21);
- Teaches (Luke 12:12; cf. John 14:26);
- Testifies or bears witness (John 15:26; cf. Rom. 8:16);
- Guides (John 16:13; Acts 8:29);
- Can be lied to and tested (Acts 5:3–4, 9);
- Speaks (Acts 8:29; cf. 10:19–20; 28:25; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:7);
- Calls to ministry and sends out (Acts 13:2-4);
- Intercedes (Rom. 8:26–27; cf. 15:16; Titus 3:5);
- Testifies or bears witness (John 15:26; cf. Rom. 8:16);
- Guides (John 16:13; Acts 8:29);
- Can be lied to and tested (Acts 5:3–4, 9);
- Speaks (Acts 8:29; cf. 10:19–20; 28:25; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:7);
- Calls to ministry and sends out (Acts 13:2-4);
- Intercedes (Rom. 8:26–27; cf. 15:16; Titus 3:5);
- Possesses a “mind” or “mindset” (Rom. 8:27);
- Reveals, searches, and knows the thoughts of God (1 Cor. 12:11); and
- Can be “grieved” (Eph. 4:30; cf. Isa 63:10; Heb. 10:29). (Peckham 2021, p. 218)

Moreover, several texts teach us that there is a real distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit, and show the distinctive agency of the Spirit (John 5:31–32; 14:16, 26; 15:26). In these passages Jesus refers to the Spirit as our “Helper” who is distinct from Himself (Jn 14:16), who proceeds from the Father, and whom the Father sends in Jesus’s name (Jn 14:26). Furthermore, it is the Spirit who will teach and remind the apostles of all that Jesus had taught them (Jn 14:26, 15:26). From these passages, we see that the Spirit is not identical to the Son or the Father (Peckham 2021, p. 219). Furthermore, we see that the Spirit has a distinctive agency.

Distinctive agency does not mean, however, that the Persons act alone, nor does it deny that those acts of the Trinity ad extra are done in isolation. As we will see below, there is reason to think that the Divine Persons do indeed work together.

5. Two Objections

In what follows, I shall consider two objections. First, I consider the objection that the ST view of divine persons amounts to tri-theism. The second objection centers on how the divine persons work together. In responding to these objections, I consider two Trinitarian models—Stephen Davis’s “Perichoretic Monotheism and the Moreland” and Craig’s Trinitarian Monotheism—and then build on those two models toward a stronger version of ST, applying Linda Zagzebski’s notion of omni-subjectivity.

5.1. Objection 1: The Charge of Tritheism

There is no shortage of criticism against ST. For, most Anti-ST criticisms charge ST of tritheism. It is the job of the defender of ST to show why they do, indeed, hold to monotheism and reject tritheism. In his work, “Anti Social Trinitarianism,” Brian Leftow summarizes the state of ST,

For ST, Father, Son, and Spirit are three individual cases of deity, three divine substances, as Adam, Eve, and Abel are three human substances. For ST, there are in the Trinity three tropes of deity, not one. In most versions of ST, each Person has his own discrete mind and will, and ‘the will of God’ and ‘the mind of God’ are ambiguous or refer to the vector sum of the Persons’ thoughts and wills. Like three humans, ST’s Persons make up a community. (Leftow 2009b, p. 53)

Two key challenges await defenders of ST. First, ST must ‘explain why its three Persons are ‘not three Gods, but one God’, and do so without transparently misreading
the Creeds” (Leftow 2009b, p. 54). A second challenge for the defender is “providing an account of what monotheism is which both is intuitively acceptable and lets ST count as monotheist” (Leftow 2009b, p. 55). According to Leftow, ST defenders have three strategies available to them for explaining how they can be monotheists and not be tri-theists: Trinity monotheism, group mind monotheism, and functional monotheism. Let us consider each of these in turn, beginning with Trinity monotheism.

The first strategy, “Trinity monotheism,” contends that though each of the Persons is divine, “only the Trinity is most properly God” (Leftow 2009b, p. 56). Leftow finds such a view problematic since it would lead to the following dilemma:

Either the Trinity is a fourth case of the divine nature, in addition to the Persons, or it is not. If it is, we have too many cases of deity for orthodoxy. If it is not, and yet is divine, there are two ways to be divine—by being a case of deity and by being a Trinity of such cases. If there is more than one way to be divine, Trinity monotheism becomes Platingian Arianism. But if there is in fact only one way to be divine, then there are two alternatives. One is that only the Trinity is God, and God is composed of non-divine Persons. The other is that the sum of all divine Persons is somehow not divine. To accept this last claim would be to give up Trinity monotheism altogether. (Leftow 2009b, p. 66)

The key difficulty with Trinity monotheism, suggests Leftow, is that it ultimately aims at making the Trinity more properly divine than the Persons.

The second ST strategy, “group mind monotheism,” posits that the divine Persons share only “one mind between them,” which can be properly called “God” or the “mind of the one God,” or it could “constitute a fourth divine mind” (Leftow 2009b, p. 57). How would such a model play out? On this Leftow suggests:

A group mind, if there were one, would be a mind composed of other minds. If the other minds were significantly simpler than the mind they composed, we might refer to the composing minds as ‘sub-minds’ and the composed item simply as a mind, but the composed item would be a group mind all the same. In group mind ST, the Trinity has or is a divine mind composed of the Persons’ minds. There is one God in the sense that there is just one ‘minded’ being composed of all divine minds. (Leftow 2009b, p. 66)

But such a strategy is theologically untenable. The obvious difficulty with such a model is that it would look an awful lot like a Quaternity instead of a Trinity since it posits that the Trinity is something like a self-conscious self along with the Father, Son, and Spirit as self-conscious selves. The minds of the persons operate as ‘sub-minds,’ with the Trinity as itself an agent who is conscious and endowed with certain faculties such as intellect or will (Craig 2009, p. 93).

Finally, the last strategy, called “functional monotheism,” takes it that “Father, Son, and Spirit are properly divine,” yet they “function as one God” (Leftow 2009b, p. 57). Leftow thinks that such a view runs into the opposite problem of Trinity monotheism, namely that “the Persons are more properly divine than the Trinity” (Leftow 2009b, p. 70). Leftow’s primary interlocutor on this view, Richard Swinburne, takes it that a plausible reading of the creeds could take the word “God” in more of an adjectival sense. Thus, the creed could be read “as asserting that three divine individuals... together constitute one God” (Swinburne 1994, p. 182). Otherwise, how else are we to take the creeds, particularly the Athanasian Creed, as not contradictory? The Trinity, then, for Swinburne consists of a collective of members who are logically indivisible, necessarily everlasting, and indivisible in action. He continues,

The collective would be causeless and so (in my sense), unlike the members, ontologically necessary, not dependent for its existence on anything outside itself. It is they, however, rather than it, who, to speak strictly, would have the divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.; though clearly there is a ready and
natural sense in which the collective can be said to have them as well. (Swinburne 1994, p. 181)

Furthermore, “[i]f all members of the group know something, the group itself, by a very natural extension of use, can be said to know the thing” (Swinburne 1994, p. 181). Finally, the strong unity of the collective makes it, along with the individual members, “an appropriate object of worship” (Swinburne 1994, p. 181). Swinburne takes it that there must be “some asymmetry of dependence” within the Trinity (Swinburne 1994, p. 185). “The Father,” says Swinburne, “is not caused to exist actively by the Son or Spirit (Swinburne 1994, p. 185). In that sense, the Father is uncaused; however,

But since the Father had no option but to cause the Son, and Father and Son had no option but to cause the Spirit, and all exist eternally, the dependence of Son on Father, and of Spirit on Father and Son, does not diminish greatness. Each could not exist but as eternally causing or permitting the other or others to exist. (Swinburne 1994, p. 185)

Swinburne takes it that this all can be found in the Nicene Creed. But how should we take Swinburne?

Obviously, Leftow finds this view untenable, since according to him such a model is not much different from modified monotheistic paganism (Leftow 2009b, p. 74). After all, in Swinburne’s view each divine Person is also a “discrete substance,” and hence a “distinct being” (Craig 2009, p. 93). The Son’s existence, though eternally created by the Father, is hardly different from that of a creature, with the exception of the Father continually conserving the Son’s existence and not annihilating Him. As William Lane Craig rightly points out, “Indeed, given that the Son is a distinct substance from the Father, the Father’s begetting the Son amounts to creatio ex nihilo, which as Arius saw, makes the Son a creature (Craig 2009, p. 93). If we take away the “causal dependence relation among the persons,” says Craig, “then we are stuck with the surprising and inexplicable fact that there just happen to exist three divine beings all sharing the same nature (Craig 2009, p. 93). If something like that is the case, then it is not at all clear how Swinburne’s functional monotheism differs from polytheism.

Given Leftow’s critique of ST, how then should we move forward? It seems of the approaches considered, the only viable option for a defender of ST is some version of Trinity monotheism. Group mind monotheism rests on a highly tenuous view of “sub-minds.” Moreover, it is not at all clear to me that one could avoid Quaternity on such a view. What of functional monotheism? While I am sympathetic to such a view, since it opts for a robust understanding of persons, and since it seems more in alignment with Scripture’s teaching on the divine persons, two problems ensue. First, it is not clear that unity of will and unity of action is enough to claim that there is indeed only one God. Second, it is hard to see how Swinburne’s model escapes the charge of tritheism, given that in it we have three discrete substances and three distinct beings, and not merely discrete persons. How should the defender of ST respond? Let us begin by sketching out two potential models.

5.1.1. Craig and Moreland’s Trinitarian Monotheism

Craig and Moreland’s model of the Trinity falls under Leftow’s classification of Trinity monotheism. If you recall, Leftow raises the following dilemma against Trinity monotheism, namely that the Trinity “is a fourth case of the divine nature, in addition to the Persons,” or it is a form of Plantingian Arianism (Leftow 2009b, p. 66). How, then, should the defender of Trinity monotheism respond? Craig and Moreland deny Leftow’s first disjunct that the Trinity just “is a fourth case of divine nature.” By denying that the Trinity is a fourth case of divinity, Leftow believes this would require the defender of ST to affirm, what he calls, “Plantingian Arianism,” by which he means “there is more than one way to be divine” (Leftow 2009b, p. 66). But Moreland and Craig ask why that is objectionable. Leftow’s alleged problem seems to be that “if only the Trinity exemplifies the complete divine nature, then the way in which the persons are divine is less than fully divine” (Moreland and Craig
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2017, p. 589). But Moreland and Craig believe this follows only if there is only one way for something to be divine. But in what sense, then, is the Trinity divine? On this Moreland and Craig say,

It now becomes clear that the reason that the Trinity is not a fourth instance of the divine nature is that there are no other instances of the divine nature. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not instances of the divine nature, and that is why there are not three Gods. The Trinity is the sole instance of the divine nature, and therefore there is but one God. So while the statement “The Trinity is God” is an identity statement, statements about the persons like “The Father is God” are not identity statements. Rather, they perform other functions, such as ascribing a title or office to a person (like “Belshazzar is king,” which is not incompatible with there being coregents) or ascribing a property to a person (a way of saying, “The Father is divine,” as one might say, “Belshazzar is regal”). (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 589)

If the Persons, therefore, are not specific instances of the divine nature, then in what sense can we properly call them “divine”? Here Moreland and Craig suggest that we should resort to positing some kind of part-whole relation when it comes to understanding the relationship between the Persons and the Godhead. They give the analogy of being a cat. “One way of being feline,” they say, “is to instantiate the nature of a cat (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590). Of course, that is not the only way to be feline. “A cat’s DNA or skeleton is feline, even if neither is a cat. Nor is this a sort of down-graded or attenuated felinity: a cat’s skeleton is fully and unambiguously feline. Indeed, a cat just is a feline animal, as a cat’s skeleton is a feline skeleton” (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590). They continue by asking, “Now if a cat is feline in virtue of being an instance of the cat nature, in virtue of what is cat’s DNA or skeleton feline (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590)? One plausible answer, they suggest, “is that they are natural parts of a cat which are unique to cats (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590). This then translates to their understanding of the Trinity, suggesting “that we could think of the persons of the Trinity as divine because they are parts of the Trinity, that is, parts of God” (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590).

Rather than downgrading the Persons’ divinity, the above account brings illumination to how the Persons contribute to the divine nature. For, on Moreland and Craig’s account, “parts can possess properties that the whole does not, and the whole can have a property because some part has it. Thus, when we ascribe omniscience and omnipotence to God, we are not making the Trinity a fourth person or agent; rather, God has these properties because the persons do (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590). Certain divine attributes, such as omniscience or omnipotence, are grounded in the persons who possess the properties; whereas, other divine attributes, such as necessity or aseity, the Persons have such properties “because God as a whole has them (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590).”

Moreland and Craig recognize that their proposal is unusual and consider whether it is unorthodox. Certainly, their proposal goes against a number of post-Nicene creeds, such as the Eleventh Council of Toledo (675) and the Athanasian Creed (fifth century), some of which they take to be under the influence of the doctrine of divine simplicity. On this they say,

Protestants bring all doctrinal statements, even conciliar creeds, especially creeds of nonecumenical councils, before the bar of Scripture. Nothing in Scripture warrants us in thinking that God is simple and that each person of the Trinity is identical to the whole Trinity. Nothing in Scripture prohibits us from maintaining that the three persons of the Godhead stand in some sort of part-whole relation to the Trinity. Therefore, Trinity monotheism cannot be condemned as unorthodox in the biblical sense. (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 590)

So far, so good, but how do Moreland and Craig dispel the charge of tritheism? “All of this still leaves us wondering,” they say, “how three persons could be parts of the same being, rather than be three separate beings (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 592). In order to
advance their version of ST, Moreland and Craig employ another analogy based on the Greco-Roman mythological creature, Cerberus, who guards the gates of Hades. Unlike other mythological creatures, Cerberus is a dog-like creature that consists of three conjoined heads to one canine body. Moreland and Craig postulate that because of the nature of its being and biology, Cerberus would not have one center of consciousness but three, which would require quite a bit of cooperation. In order to flesh this out a bit more, the authors assign each of the heads a name—Bowser, Spike, and Rover. They suppose further that if some demi-god, like Hercules, attempted to storm the gates of Hades, and that one of the heads, say, Rover, snarled at Hercules. It would be appropriate to say, on the one hand, that Rover snarled at Hercules. But it would be equally appropriate to say that Cerberus snarled at Hercules since there is only one dog-like being. But what if they claim that Cerberus is not merely canine, but each of the heads has a mind just as we do—minds endowed with something like rationality and self-consciousness? Further, what if each of the heads has some kind of personal agency? For Moreland and Craig, that would entail something like a tri-personal being. Suppose further that Cerberus was to die in body and its soul live on in the afterlife. What we would then have is something akin to an unembodied soul with three centers of consciousness. Analogously then, if God is a soul or soul-like, then as an immaterial spirit, God would persist as three distinct centers of consciousness but constituted as one being (Moreland and Craig 2017, p. 593).

The Moreland and Craig model is not without difficulties. After all, consider conjoined twins. Might not one argue that instead of one soul, it is really two souls conjoined with a shared body? This is certainly a possibility, and it may indeed be the case. But, even here, it is not exactly clear. There are cases of twins who are conjoined at the brain—a condition called cephalopagus—who share significant amounts of brain tissue and, according to one study, “can see through each other’s eyes and feel each others’ [sic] pin pricks” (Savulescu and Persson 2016, p. 45). Now, whether or not these twins share a soul is questionable, but they do seem to share conscious states (even if minimally).

Much of the discussion, here, also depends on one’s view of the soul, whether one lands on a creationist view, whereby God creates each new soul of a person, or a view of the soul whereby it is deeply connected to one’s body, as in the case of the classical theological view of traducianism, or other views such as hylomorphism or emergent dualism. Unfortunately, it is not within the scope of this paper to explore these issues further. For our purposes, Moreland and Craig’s emphasis on Cerberus only serves to provide an illustration or an analogy of how we could conceive of a soul with three centers of consciousness. It is not outside of the realm of possibility, and it only serves to illuminate what it might look like if God, indeed, is a singular essence or substance with three centers of consciousness. As we shall see below, there is a further difficulty with this model that will need further consideration, namely, how the Persons of the Trinity work together.

Having considered the Moreland/Craig model, we shall now turn to our next model.

5.1.2. Davis’s Perichoretic Monotheism

Stephen Davis proposed a model of ST he calls “perichoretic monotheism” (which does not quite fit squarely into Leftow’s classification of ST approaches). In so doing, Davis suggests the following criteria are needed for any model to guarantee that the Trinity is an individual (unity).

1. Each of the Persons equally possesses the divine essence in its totality. 2. The three necessarily share a marvelous unity of purpose, will, and action; that is, it is not possible for them to disagree or to be in conflict. 3. They exist in perichoresis (circumincession, co-inherence, permeation). That is, each is ‘in’ the others; each ontologically embraces the others; to be a divine Person is by nature to be in relation to the other two; the boundaries between them are transparent; their love for and communion with each other is such that they can be said to ‘interpenetrate’ each other. (Davis 2016, p. 63)
Davis wants to avoid more radical statements about ST, whereby the defender of ST posits God as a community or society. He believes that such statements go too far toward tritheism. Davis prefers the more modest notion that “God is something like a community” (Davis 2016, p. 63). After offering what he takes to be proof for ST, Davis provides six claims central to his own perichoretic model.

1. God is like a community.
2. Each of the three Persons equally possess the divine essence.
3. The three Persons are all equally and essentially divine, metaphysically necessary, eternal (or everlasting), uncreated, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
4. In the immanent Trinity (i.e., the Trinity as it is in itself), the logical basis of all differentiation among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is their relations to each other.
5. All three Persons are involved in all extra-Trinitarian acts.
6. The Persons are related to each other by perichoresis. (Davis 2016, pp. 69–72)

Davis’s model closely resembles other ST models; however, the central difference rests in his emphasis on perichoresis. Like other varieties of ST, Davis takes it that the “Persons are three distinct centers of consciousness, will, and action” (Davis 2016, p. 69). By “person” he means (loosely) “a conscious purposive agent” (Davis 2016, p. 69). Persons who are “conscious” engage in such “mental” activities as “thinking, feeling, loving, willing, believing, remembering, and knowing” (Davis 2016, p. 69). “Purposive” refers to persons having “desires, intentions, and aims” and that they can set out to achieve such. Finally, “agents” are such “that they have the ability to act, to do or achieve things” (Davis 2016, p. 69).

As far as the essential divine properties are concerned (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, etc.), the divine Persons have them necessarily. Davis takes it that it is perfectly coherent for Christians to speak of, say, “the Father is omnipotent,” “the Son is omnipotent,” and “the Spirit is omnipotent,” or to say “God is omnipotent”; however, he emphasizes that this should not be understood to mean that there are four things that are omnipotent. Rather, they are different ways of speaking of “the same three-in-one-reality” (Davis 2016, p. 70). The defender of ST should avoid any notion that there is a “fourth mind,” or a “fourth being,” or a “fourth God.” He understands how some might argue from this “that the ‘Father’, ‘Son’, ‘Holy Spirit’, and ‘the Godhead’ are all numerically distinct from each other” (Davis 2016, p. 70). “But what blocks this inference,” says Davis, “is the fact that the three Persons are related to each other perichoretically” (Davis 2016, p. 70).

Davis rejects the idea that any one of the Persons caused any of the other Persons, which stands in stark contrast to Swinburne’s version of ST. Yet, he affirms that eternal relations between the Father, Son, and Spirit, namely, that “the Father has the relation of begetting to the Son, and the Father and (possibly) the Son . . . have the relationship of ‘spirating’ or ‘sending’ to the Spirit,” and so forth” (Davis 2016, p. 70). “The Father’s relation to the Son (and the Spirit),” says Davis, “is non-causal and non-temporal”; rather, the “priority had by the Father as the ‘fount of divinity’ is entirely logical in nature” (Davis 2016, p. 71). It “has to do only with the proper place to begin an explanation” (Davis 2016, p. 71).

As mentioned, central to Davis’s model is the notion of perichoresis. Perichoresis, first coined by Gregory of Nazianzus, who employed the concept in conjunction with Christology, was later used by John of Damascus to describe “the mutual indwelling” or “mutual interpenetration” between the Persons of the Trinity (Harrison 1991, p. 55). Perichoresis is central to the inner life or “inner being” of the Trinity, whereby the Persons persist in the “highest degree of self-giving love” (Davis 2016, p. 72). According to Davis, “[t]he Persons are fully open to each other, their actions ad extra are actions in common, they ‘see with each other’s eyes’, the boundaries between them is transparent to each other, and each ontologically embraces the others” (Davis 2016, p. 72). In order to grasp the concept of perichoresis, Davis invites us to consider three circles labeled 1, 2, and 3. Imagine also that the circles exist in three different states A, B, C. In State A the circles border one another with the circumferences of each circle touching the others. In State B the circles no longer
merely border one another but begin to overlap. Here it is not a full overlapping, but only partial. In state C the circles have fully merged. Though impossible geometrically with objects like circles, he has us imagine that the three circles are simultaneously in State A and State C. Davis continues, “[t]hen you could legitimately say, of any property p possessed by all three, the Circle 1 is p, the Circle 2 is p, and that Circle 3 is p. You could even speak of the one circle that exists in State C—call it Circle 123—and say that it is p. But you cannot say that there are four things that are p; that would simply be false” (Davis 2016, p. 73).

Does Davis’s model guard against Leftow’s charge of tritheism? It would seem so. Davis would agree with Leftow that if the divine Persons were not perichoretically related, as in the case of functional monotheism, then we would have a form of polytheism. On this Davis writes, “I hold that ST is monotheistic not only because the Persons’ shared divine essence and their necessary agreement and cooperation, but also because of their loving, interpermeating, boundaryless relations with each other” (Davis 2016, p. 75). But would not Davis’s form of ST amount to their being four divine beings, since he posits that there’s more than one way to be divine? This, too, does not follow. “We must notice that the predicate ‘. . . is God’ is being used in two different ways” (Davis 2016, p. 75) says Davis. He continues,

The Godhead ‘is God’ in the sense of strict numerical identity. The Godhead (which consists of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we might say, exhausts God. Here the word ‘God’ in the predicate ‘. . . is God’ refers to an individual. But when we say that the Father ‘is God’ the Son ‘is God’, and the Holy Spirit ‘is God’, we are not talking about strict numerical identity; it would be false to say that ‘the Father exhausts God.’ Here the predicate ‘. . . is God’ does not refer to an individual but is a property meaning something close to ‘is divine’. (Davis 2016, p. 75)

Thus far, Davis has satisfactorily answered Leftow’s concern about polytheism, but there is still the issue of how the Persons work together.

5.2. Objection #2: How Do the Persons Work Together?

Both models answer satisfactorily Leftow’s charge of tritheism. The strength of each model is found in the model’s ability to (1) show that the divine Persons are genuine or robust persons, as reflected in Scripture; and (2) demonstrate God as numerically one, while maintaining the clear distinctiveness of the divine Persons. But there are some challenges that ensue.

The Craig and Moreland model offers a way forward in thinking about how God can be numerically one, and yet maintain clear distinctions between the Persons. The analogy of Cerberus is quite illuminating in how we can imagine three discrete minds or centers of consciousness and yet have only one soul or divine substance. One difficulty with the Craig and Moreland model is how we are to understand the part-whole relationship. Craig and Moreland defend this quite admirably, and I’m inclined to agree that one could reasonably maintain such an understanding, though there is still much work to be done. But perhaps the more damaging difficulty stems from what Scott Williams has called the “necessary agreement” thesis (NA). Central to NA is the belief “that the divine persons are necessarily unified or necessarily agree regarding all things, including permissible alternatives” (Williams 2017, p. 321). In other words, how is it that the Persons work together without going their own way, so to speak? Williams believes that such models that appeal to some agreed-upon moral reasons ultimately fail or are just unsatisfactory. I do not think that such a problem is nearly as damaging to their model as Williams might think, and I believe there’s a way to bolster it to ensure that the divine Persons do, indeed, work together in a unified manner. How then might we move forward? I believe the defender of ST who finds something like Craig and Moreland’s Trinity Monotheism or Davis’s Perichoretic Monotheism attractive can bolster those models by adding emphasis on two things: (1) by employing the doctrine of perichoresis, and (2) by employing a modified version of Linda Zagzebski’s omni-subjectivity.
First, concerning the doctrine of perichoresis. I will not here revisit all that was said earlier about Davis’s model but will only emphasize that perichoresis provides a mechanism for understanding how Persons can genuinely relate to one another. For, not only do the Persons share singular divine essence and substance (i.e., if we follow the Moreland and Craig model) but the Persons are completely open up to and mutually indwell One Another. At the center of all reality is this interpenetrating, dynamic, and self-giving love relationship between the Persons of the Trinity, whereby the divine Persons are completely open up toward one another and self-giving in all of their internal movements toward one another.

Yet, in Davis’s own model, he anticipated such an objection as the one raised by Williams. He recognizes that the Persons all are omniscient. If that is the case, then the Father knows all that the Son and Spirit know, the Son knows all that the Father and Spirit know, and the Spirit knows all that the Father and Spirit know, with the exception of “logical private truths” such as “I am the Father” (when spoken by the Father) or “I am the Son” (when spoken by the Son). “The contents of their minds are wholly open to one another,” says Davis (Davis 2016, p. 77). He continues, “[i]f the three Persons are omniscient, the three minds will know not only truths like ‘2 + 2 = 4’ and ‘Abraham Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth in 1865,’ but also truths like ‘The Person who says, ‘I am the unbegotten one’ is the Father’ (Davis 2016, p. 77). We have already noted that taking into consideration conjoined twins’ studies, it is feasible to think that human beings can share conscious states, even if minimally. If that is the case for human beings, then why could that not also be the case for an omniscient, immaterial being such as God, who has three centers of consciousness, with each of the divine persons having their own distinct consciousness state, yet the ability to share one another’s thoughts. How is this case? Davis suggests that perhaps it is through something like telepathy. But perhaps there’s another way—a modification of Linda Zagzebski’s notion of omni-subjectivity.

“Omni-subjectivity”, says Zagzebski, “is, roughly, the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness the first-person perspective of every conscious being” (Zagzebski 2008, p. 231). For Zagzebski, omni-subjectivity is entailed by omniscience, and she believes that for God to be omniscient, “he must know every aspect of his creation, including the conscious states of his creatures” (Zagzebski 2008, p. 231). I cannot, here, for space and time restraints, rehearse Zagzebski’s defense of omni-subjectivity, but will only borrow from the fruit of her labor. Working from modern theories on empathy, Zagzebski introduces what she calls, “perfect total empathy,” which would “include a complete and accurate representation of all of another person’s conscious states” (Zagzebski 2008, p. 241). She believes that an omniscient being must have perfect total empathy with every conscious being, whether that is you, me, or even one’s pet dog, Fido. “An omnisubjective being,” she says, “would know everything you know or understand from living your life” (Zagzebski 2008, p. 242).

How then should we think of Zagzebski’s notion of omni-subjectivity as it applies to the Trinity? First, it is not clear whether or not God has omni-subjectivity. All kinds of difficulties could arise if God is able to perfectly represent “all of another person’s conscious states.” Think here of some awful scenarios like a rapist or serial killer. Would we want to say that God has an accurate representation of their conscious states? Many have deep reservations about that. Yet, some may find it quite appealing to think that God has the ability to relate to victims who have gone through deep episodes of suffering. Here, we do not need to defend omni-subjectivity. Rather, we only need to suggest that God has something like omni-subjectivity, en se, with respect to the Persons of the Trinity, which is what I shall call “inter-relational subjectivity.” Given that the Persons share omniscience and given something like an interpenetrating (perichoretic) love relationship between the Persons of the Trinity and that the Persons are completely open up toward one another, something like inter-relational subjectivity might indeed be the case.

The defender of ST is not out of the woods, yet. Some may persist in their doubt that inter-relational subjectivity and perichoresis are enough. Even if the persons share perfect omniscience, know completely one another’s thoughts, and have a perfect inter-penetrating
love relationship, how can we guarantee that they will get along or indeed work together toward the same goal? I can think of at least three possibilities.

First, one might affirm the eternal sub-ordinationist view—the view that the Son and Spirit not only proceed from the Father as the source but that the Son and Spirit functionally submit to the Father. As Bruce Ware suggests, “the Father’s distinctive functional relation to the Son, in part, contains the expression of paternal authority in this relationship, and the Son’s distinctive functional relation to the Father, in part, contains the expression of filial submission” (Ware 2019, pp. 22–23). Many find the eternal sub-ordinationist view too difficult to accept.

Perhaps a second option is to suggest that the distinctive ad extra operations of the Persons of the Trinity, though inseparable (i.e., *Omnia opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*), align with the personal properties (relations) of the divine Persons (Moser 2019, pp. 81–94). This certainly would align more with the tradition, but could it work with ST? Davis seems to promote something akin to this in his take on the divine processions. Rather than taking the divine relations to be causative in nature (as we might find among patristic and medieval theologians), Davis takes them as being non-causative and non-temporal. On this he says, “The priority had by the Father as the ‘fount of divinity’ is entirely logical in nature... the Father’s priority has to do with the proper place to begin an explanation” (Davis 2016, p. 71). He continues, “[t]hat the Father is first in the order of explanation is taken by Christians as a matter of revealed truth” (Davis 2016, p. 71). From there one might tease out how the inseparable operations could flow from the divine relations. But for the sake of space, we cannot here tease this out any further.

What of the third view? This view suggests that the divine Persons simply work together out of love toward one another, analogously to how human beings will often work together, particularly when human beings are rightly ordered. Just as any human family or committee, eager to carry out a task, will often designate one person to do one task and another person to do a different task, why could not a perfectly loving and perfectly rational tri-unity of divine Persons do this all the greater? After all, Christ set out for us a model of how the Church itself ought to operate—one that seeks the good of the other, without looking to one’s self-interests. Consider the Christ Hymn, whereby the Son models for us what it is like to give oneself as a servant for the sake of others. Christ’s becoming a servant occurred before His becoming like us. And in the same passage, the Father exalts the Son above all other names, whereby the Son receives the highest honor and praise. What we see working out in the economic Trinity is nothing more than what it is like in the inner life of the ontological Trinity—one of self-giving love toward the Other.

6. Conclusions

Of course, there is always the danger of reading the modern sense of “person” into the Trinity. Nevertheless, we should ultimately seek to ground our notion and understanding of the Triune God and the divine Persons in the pages of Scripture. If I have read Scripture correctly, it informs us that the Persons are distinct actors or agents who appear to have distinct minds or centers of consciousness. The persons are significantly, meaningfully, and robustly relational. Yet, it is understandable why some would be hesitant to use the word “social” in describing the Trinity. Perhaps, the concept of God being of “community,” “society,” or even “society or community-like” is too crude for the Triune God. Maybe that is the case. Perhaps “Social Trinity” is the wrong wording, and something like “Onto-relational monotheism” or “Onto-relational Trinitarianism” would fit the bill. Yet, I think it is a mistake to accuse defenders of ST of simply reading modern concepts of “person” into the doctrine of the Trinity, especially when Scripture itself uses such language. Finally, perhaps, we have been seeing things the wrong way, namely that the Tri-personal God—ontologically speaking—is the ground for personhood, relationship, community, and society, and not the other way around. Regardless of the terminology we use, at the end of the day, it is proper to maintain that the divine Persons are discrete and distinct and at the bottom relational. We do not have to think of God as a society to get this point.
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Notes

1. As Pavel Butakov (2022) has argued, there is not just one model of divine relations. Patristic and medieval theologians put forth various understandings of the divine relations, leading to differing and often incompatible Trinitarian models.

2. For further consideration, see Hollingsworth (2023), Mullins (2023), and Hasker (2023).

3. Here, I am not sure that I’d cash out the different properties as Moreland and Craig do. For our intent and purposes, it is enough to recognize that personal properties are more than mere relations.


5. For an interesting discussion see Tom Cochrane (2021).

6. I have deep reservations against this view, but included it as an option. For a detailed work against such a view, see Bird and Harrower (2019).


8. I owe this language to my Liberty University colleague, Josh Waltman.

References


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