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Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism

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Abstract: After laying out the claims and motivations of Social Trinitarianism, I develop three new arguments against it. According to the first two, if Social Trinitarianism were true, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would have engaged in wrongful deception via both Old and New Testament revelation. I briefly consider the strength of the arguments and some possible replies to them, concluding that they constitute good reasons to deny that version of trinitarian doctrine. According to the final argument, Social Trinitarianism is incompatible with two central claims of the New Testament.

The rush to ST

Recent years have seen a movement of Christian philosophers towards the version of

trinitarianism called Social Trinitarianism (hereafter, ST). The lines between this and the more traditional Latin Trinitarianism are not always clear, and there are different versions of ST, but what I mean by ST in this paper is the most clearly defined and understandable version of it, the outlines of which I will sketch shortly.¹

A problem motivating ST is that the orthodox formula is vague, admitting of at least two readings. If the members of the Trinity are *homoousias* (same substance or essence), does that mean they are one individual being, or that they are each the same kind of being? Are they numerically, or only qualitatively the same? ST refuses to obfuscate here, answering that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all one kind of being; each is divine. ST also clearly says what the relation of each member of the Trinity is to God, and what their relation is to each other. Each member of the Trinity is a member of the community which is God. Each is, in a sense, one third of God, in the way that a single player is one eleventh of a football team. God is not some further conscious being with three parts, but is rather the community of three divine persons. How are the three related to each other? They are qualitatively similar, but numerically distinct.² None is strictly identical to either of the others.

While the reasons behind the popularity of ST are complex,³ I believe that at least among philosophers, the driving factors are awareness of difficulties with the more traditional so-called Latin Trinitarianism,⁴ and awareness of the logic of identity, especially the indiscernibility of identicals. If x is identical to y, then whatever is true of x is true of y, and vice-versa. Though this has been disputed by a small minority of philosophers, it is nonetheless a self-evident truth, one

which anyone can know simply by understanding it and paying some attention to it. A consequence of this is that for any x and y , if something is true of x and not of y (or vice-versa), then we can be sure that x and y are *not* identical, that is, that we are dealing with two individuals and not one.

Turning to the Trinity, it is inescapable that some things are true of the Son that are not true of the Father and the Holy Spirit – for example, only the Son was incarnated and died on a cross. And the Holy Spirit, but not the Son or Father, was sent by the Son and Father to act as a comforter and guide to believers. It follows that each of the three is numerically distinct from the others. When one is clear about the implications of the indiscernibility of identicals for the doctrine of the Trinity, ST presents itself as an attractive way to remain a trinitarian. In short, the main attractions of ST are theoretical. It is clear, and consistent with an important principle of reason.

Several metaphysical and theological objections to ST and related theories have been explored in recent work,⁵ but my purpose here is to give two biblical-moral objections and one biblical objection to ST. I will approach the first objection by way of a fictional story.

The Girl with Three Dads

Little orphan Annie lived anonymously among the many other orphans in a Los Angeles orphanage. Like all orphans, she longed for the love of a parent, though she was forced to make due

with shallower and less stable human connections. But one day in her eighth year she received a long-distance phone call from New York City that changed her life; on that day, she discovered that she wasn't an orphan after all! The man on the phone, named 'Fred', introduced himself as her father, and initiated a wonderful parental relationship which guided Annie all the way to adulthood.

For complex reasons, the relationship had to remain long-distance. Annie stayed at the orphanage, but had frequent communications with her loving dad. Fred said he was her only dad, and that she should listen to him over all others, and obey him, because he had her best interests in mind and loved her like no other. He taught her what to do and what to avoid, patiently nurtured her, and made her life worth living. At times he sent money, people, and other provisions to help her, though he remained in New York City. With such provision and guidance, Annie grew up, left the orphanage, went to college, and became a professor of philosophy specializing in ethics.

Though like all children Annie sometimes neglected her parent, she never lost touch, and during one conversation in her thirty-fifth year, Fred told her something that made her blood boil with anticipation: he was coming to Los Angeles to visit her! Finally, she would get to know things about him that can't be discovered over the phone. She counted the days, and the night before her dad's arrival was a sleepless one. Fred told her how to recognize him at the airport; he'd exit the plane wearing a t-shirt with the words, 'I love Annie.'

At the airport, she held her breath as people exited the plane into the terminal, and her heart leapt when a man entered wearing the expected t-shirt. But her delight was immediately clouded by confusion when two further, similar-looking men entered wearing the same sort of t-shirt.

‘Perhaps,’ she thought, ‘my dad is playing a joke on me.’ She checked a nearby plant to see if it concealed a candid camera, but found none. Approaching the first man, she squeaked, ‘Dad? It’s Annie.’

It turned out there was no man named Fred. The three men, strikingly similar, but having some important differences, explained their arrangement to Annie over the following days. Their names were Don, Jon, and Ron; Don was Jon’s father, and she was unclear about the relation of Ron to the other two. But for some reason which they never explained, the three had freely decided to initiate a three on one relationship with Annie, though she thought it was a one on one relationship. It seems that Don, Jon, and Ron took turns talking to her on the phone, always using a voice disguising device to render their voices indistinguishable, and perfectly communicating to each other what went on. Thus was born the fictional character of her dad ‘Fred’. ‘Fred’ was just the group of three men. While none of the three was her biological father, they were all somehow involved in her production in a way she didn’t understand. ‘Perhaps each contributed a third of my DNA,’ Annie thought. At any event, there was no mother, and no one else was this involved in producing her – she was sure of that.

Annie’s reactions to this discovery followed a certain progression. First, there was utter, deep shock. She had never suspected that ‘dad’ was a committee and not a man. Second, she decided that in a way, she had three dads, and that this was a wonderful discovery. After all, during their visit in Los Angeles, she found that Don, Jon, and Ron each individually had those winsome traits she formerly ascribed to her dad – wisdom, kindness, attentiveness, humor, and so on. She was now

grateful to each for his portion of the love and provision she had received. A third phase of her reaction was less happy. She realized that Don, Jon, and Ron had deceived her, and as far as she could tell, they did so without any good reason. She missed ‘dad’, and was troubled to think that her long personal interaction with him was a sham. She had been interacting, in a sense, with a fictional character and not a person, albeit a character perfectly played by three very loving men. She felt like a wife who discovered that her ‘husband’ was really identical triplets taking turns. Such a woman, Annie reflected, would feel she had been raped by all three. Though Annie didn’t feel quite *that* violated, she did feel violated; she felt sure she had been mistreated.

In the end, Don, Jon, and Ron kept up their relationships with Annie, though now on a different basis. Annie never did discover the reason for their deception, nor did they ever explain themselves. She decided that though she had three good dads (or perhaps, three fatherly friends), none of them were perfect, for they had wrongfully deceived her.

The first deception argument against ST

The first deception argument against ST is this:

(1) If ST is true, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acted like Don, Jon, and Ron.

(2) Don, Jon, and Ron acted wrongly.

(3) Therefore, if ST is true, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acted wrongly.

(4) But it is false that any member of the Trinity has acted wrongly.

(5) Therefore, ST is false.

This is a strong argument, though it is not a knockdown proof for several reasons. For one thing, premises (1) and (2) are not self-evident or known with the highest degree of certainty. But I claim that they can be known, and that the whole argument gives considerable support to the conclusion.

Starting with premise (2), I find myself convinced that this is true, though it is hard to say exactly what makes it true. It is clear that Don, Jon, and Ron have deceived Annie. Though not all deception is morally wrong, it seems that Don, Jon, and Ron have no morally sufficient reason to deceive Annie. Though only eight years old when they initiated contact, she could have been introduced to one or more of the three instead of the fictional 'Fred', and she could even have been told that she had three dads. It is part of our story that the men weren't compelled to adopt the charade to protect her, to achieve some wonderful aim that required it, or because each by himself lacked the resources to properly parent her. And it seems clear that the arrangement was in some way disrespectful and inappropriate. Though on the whole Annie greatly benefited from the arrangement, she would have benefited at least as well from a straightforward relationship with one or more of the three, and the fact that they were great benefactors to her doesn't seem to give Don, Jon, and Ron the right to deceive her regarding such an important matter as who her father is.

Though I can't spell out general necessary and sufficient conditions for a deception being wrong, I believe we can see that *this* deception is wrong, and we have at least a dim view of why.

Premise (1) is true. Our three men passed themselves off as one personal being, while in fact they were three personal beings. The versions of ST we are concerned with say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in fact a community of three numerically distinct beings. But did they really pass themselves off as one personal being? ST proponents must say that they did. They identify the collection of the three with the God of the Old Testament, whose proper name is Yahweh. And Yahweh most certainly appears as a single personal being there. We'll consider a few texts on this shortly.

But first, consider how the notion of progressive revelation is often employed to smooth over apparent tension between the Old Testament and the doctrine of the Trinity. The defense goes like this: *God is not obligated to immediately reveal his whole nature at once. Before the coming of Christ, he revealed that he was at least uni-personal. And now in these latter days, he's revealed that he's exactly tri-personal.*

This strategy doesn't work for ST, and it is important to see why. On ST, there is no personal being which later turns out to be tri-personal. What there are, are three beings which can appear to be one, which act much as one, and which can be thought of as one, but which are, for all that, three numerically distinct persons. In ancient times, people thought this collective was a person, that is, a subject of consciousness with knowledge and the ability to intentionally act. But their beliefs about God weren't, according to ST, merely incomplete, but rather radically mistaken. They mistook a

non-person for a person.

Here is a sampling of the scriptural evidence behind premise (1). On the face of it, each of these three groups of passages involves the self-revelation of God/the LORD/Yahweh (the God of Abraham, David, the prophets, and so on) as a personal individual. One has to weigh the evidence of scripture as a whole, but these are important, clear, and I think representative texts. On texts like these I rest the case for (1).

First, there are passages in which Yahweh appears as a single humanoid being, in bodily form. In Genesis 3 he walks in the garden, looking for Adam and Eve. In Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 he appears as a figure sitting on a heavenly throne.

Second, in other passages, such as the ten commandments in Exodus 20, the LORD calls himself a god, and a god is by definition a personal being. Again, in Deuteronomy 6, we read ‘Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.’ (Deut 6:4)⁶ And the prophet Micah exclaims, ‘There is no other god like you, O LORD.’ (Mic 7:18, TEV)

Third, in Psalm 103 and 116, and many other places, God is praised as a wonderful, generous, kind, and father-like personal being. In Jeremiah 3 he compares himself to the father and husband of Israel. In sum, Old Testament worshippers relate to God as to a wonderful person, not a wonderful thing (or quasi-thing), such as a community of divinities.⁷

The familiarity of the doctrine of the Trinity tends to prevent us from grasping that the ST version of it implies divine deception. But consider this. If this ‘God’ character turned out to be a group of three hundred and forty seven deities working together, wouldn’t we have deception then?

But if then, why not with only three? The number seems irrelevant, so long as it is more than one.

ST proponents must believe that in Old Testament times, the three divinities appeared to numerous people for hundreds of years as the personal being Yahweh. Countless individual Jews took the bait, mistakenly thinking that Yahweh was a god, indeed the highest or only god. Apparently, at least one of the three deities was involved in whatever ‘Yahweh’ did. Strictly, ‘Yahweh’ - the group – did nothing; only individual entities have causal powers. (Remember, on the present versions of ST ‘God’ is not a composite deity, but simply a non-deity, because it is a group of deities. It is no more a deity than a football team is a football player.) Whatever appeared to be done by him was in fact done by at least one of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Imagine that you are a sixty year old Jew in the year 40 A.D., and that you have been a disciple of Jesus Christ, and are now part of the budding Jewish-Christian community. Suppose further, anachronistically, that you believed ST. Wouldn’t you feel like Annie?

The intellectual humility defense

The only place for the social trinitarian to make her stand is at the third step in the argument. She needn’t deny line (3), but can take comfort in the fact that premises (1) and (2) don’t imply (3). This is a meager comfort, for (1) and (2) lend support to (3), and thus to the conclusion of the argument.

Suppose I see one man punch another, seize his wallet, and flee, while the apparent victim shouts ‘Police!’ These truths I’ve perceived don’t *entail* that I’ve just seen a morally wrong action (they’re consistent with my having witnessed a movie shoot or a game), but they certainly, in the absence of surprising new information, support that belief.

In some central features, the actions of Don, Ron, and Jon would be like the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if ST were true. I can’t show that those actions would share *all* of their morally relevant features. But if upon close inspection they share all the morally relevant features we can think of, that gives us reason to believe (3). If it quacks like a duck, waddles like a duck, and smells like a duck, well, you know.

It is indisputable that if ST were true, the Holy Threesome would have intentionally deceived many people. The deception couldn’t have been *unintentional*. It wasn’t that, as is the case with some parents’ lies to children, that the victims were incapable of understanding the truth, or couldn’t emotionally handle the truth. The Three couldn’t have been compelled by some threat, and we can’t imagine what sort of wonderful plan of theirs this deception might be necessary to. Of course, the Holy Three would, by virtue of being divinities, have many features that no mere humans could have. They would all be omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, uncreated, and so on, but none of those features seems to make a moral difference in this case.

What about certain special relations that some theorists attribute to the Holy Three? Suppose they enjoy perfect access to each others’ thought lives, can’t possibly disagree, cooperate in or share all their actions, and think of themselves primarily as group members rather than independent

individuals. I can't see that any of this makes a difference. I assume that ST theorists won't dispute (4). (1) and (2) support (3). (3) and (4) imply (5). Therefore, the first deception argument gives us reason to believe (5), that ST is false.

If the Christian scriptures are sources of knowledge about God, then we know that if ST is true, God deceived and is still deceiving many people. This deception appears to be wrong. Still, if we *knew* or had strong grounds for believing that ST was true, we could perhaps rest with this defense: *God's ways are higher than ours. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must have some good reason for their deception; there must be a moral justification for their action, though we have no idea what this is.* Let's call this the 'intellectual humility defense' against the deception argument. Unfortunately, the prospects for this defense are quite dim. They are dim not because we have reason to believe that we would be able to comprehend any reason a divinity might have for deceiving. Rather, the intellectual humility defense is inappropriate because ST is not something any Christian knows or has strong grounds to believe, since it is not supported by, and is even inconsistent with the New Testament.⁸ To see this, we need to consider the second deception argument against ST.

The second deception argument against ST

It is worth asking why the New Testament writers and early Christians, after having received

the enhanced revelation of God through Jesus and his apostles, didn't go through any agony like Annie's. The answer is that they didn't believe ST. Of course, all will admit that no one back then had a metaphysically developed trinitarian belief of any sort, though many later Christians think of them as somehow implicit or confused trinitarians.

Whether or not that is so, it is clear enough that the New Testament writers, early Christians, and Jesus Christ himself held beliefs incompatible with ST. This is because they identified Yahweh not with the collection of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but rather with the Father. One searches the New Testament in vain for any representation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as collectively constituting the group called 'God'. (Passages in which all three are merely mentioned or depicted are irrelevant here.) What one finds instead is that all New Testament writers (and according to them Jesus himself) think of God and the Father as numerically the same. God *just is* the Father, and vice-versa.

How can I assert this? I am simply following standard procedure for understanding who is who according to a text. Suppose I pick up an outdated piece of low-brow Republican propaganda, and find sentences which use the following names and phrases: 'Bill Clinton', 'Bubba', 'The Philanderer in Chief', 'Slick Willy', and 'Hillary's husband'. How do I know that all of these terms are supposed to refer to one individual? I know this because the author uses them interchangeably in various contexts, while not asserting that any of one of those things has any feature which the others lack. There may be potentially confusing passages, where, let's suppose, Al Gore is referred to as 'Bill Clinton', but in the main, it is clear that those names and phrases are, as far as the author is

concerned, so many different labels for one and the same thing, the former president of the United States from Arkansas. To summarize, if an author asserts something of x which he denies of y (or vice-versa), then he *doesn't* think that that x and y are one and the same thing. And if an author repeatedly uses the terms 'x' and 'y' interchangeably, and doesn't attribute any feature to one which he denies to the other, then (barring strange circumstances) he thinks of x and y as numerically one thing, the two names or phrases 'x' and 'y' being two ways to refer to it.⁹

In the New Testament, 'Father' and expressions containing it are usually used interchangeably with terms which refer to Yahweh. Thus Jesus talks about the 'kingdom of God' (Mt 21:31), which he also calls 'my Father's kingdom'. (Mt 26:29)¹⁰ He calls himself the 'Son of God', and addresses God as his Father. (Tellingly, it is 'God', and not 'God the Father' who is the Father of Christ in the New Testament.) John has Jesus say before his ascension, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' (Jn 20:17) As Jesus prepares to wash his disciples' feet, John comments, 'Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table...' (Jn 13:3-4) In the introduction to his Apocalypse John says that Jesus 'made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father...' (Rev 1:6). After greeting the Colossian church, Paul comments, 'In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...' (Col 1:3) James uses the phrase 'God our Father'. (Js 1:27, NIV, NJB) Peter exclaims 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!' (1 Pt 1:3)

Many, many other passages could be cited, but these are enough. We infer from them that these authors think that the Father just is God, that is, Yahweh. Consequently, on the charitable assumption of consistency, we infer that they *don't* think that the Father is one third of the community which is God (as ST would have it). It is also striking that nowhere in the New Testament do we find a case where 'God' should be read as referring to the collection of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It nearly always refers to the Father of Christ, while in the remaining instances Christ is called 'God'.¹¹

*Aha, says the objector, now you've granted too much. You're reading the Bible naively, in at least two ways. First, you're trying to argue that 'Yahweh', 'God', and 'the Father' are names for one individual. (y = g = f) But of those three, only the first is a proper name. The others are not names, but titles which are used of various individuals. You're consequently reading complex texts too simplistically. Second, you've admitted that the New Testament writers say that Christ is God, and this is inconsistent with your claim that only the Father is God. By calling Christ 'God' these writers are giving him a very high ontological status; that is, they are asserting his divinity. And because of the context of ancient monotheism, we must see these writers as locating Christ within the nature of the one God.*¹²

In response, the first part of this objection contains some important truths, but they do no harm to my argument. The second objection is confused in several ways; but the popularity of this sort of response means that I must answer it.

First let's consider the issue of names and titles. In first order logic, we use what I'd call pure

proper names. For example, in the logical sentence 'Fa' the letter F is a predicate, and *a* is a name, so that the sentence reads '*a* has property F'. We require that each name refer to one and only one individual item in the domain we're talking about, and these pure proper names have no descriptive content, and can never function as kind terms. They *only* refer to individuals. The proper names of ordinary languages, such as 'George Bush' and 'Tony Blair' are somewhat different. For one thing, they can be used to refer to different individuals; which one is usually made clear enough by the context. For another, some names have descriptive content; in particular, in biblical times it was common to take sentences or phrases and turn them into names (e.g. the Hebrew name we translate 'Immanuel' or 'Emmanuel' means 'God with us' or 'God is with us', and the Hebrew for 'Isaac' can be read as the sentence 'he laughs'). Though words used as proper names contain, or used to contain, descriptive content or complete sentences, they are usually, though not exclusively, used to refer to individuals, not to describe them or make claims involving them. Hence, though the Hebrew for 'Jesus' can mean 'savior' or 'Yahweh saves', when someone says (in any natural language) 'Jesus wept', the word 'Jesus' is being used simply to pick out an individual, and her sentence translates into standard first-order logic as 'Wj'. My point so far is that in most cases, natural language proper names do the same work as the pure proper names of logic.

Titles are kind terms or descriptions used to refer to individuals. I don't see a sharp line between titles and names, though examples of titles are easy to give: 'King', 'Boss', 'Father', 'Coach'. Many phrases are titles as well: 'our King', 'the boss', 'our dear father', 'the current coach'. Like proper names, titles are used to refer to individuals, but with titles the content of the kind term or

description is not out of view. If I address someone as ‘Boss’, or tell my co-worker that ‘the boss says that we’re goofing off too much’, I refer to an individual just as surely as if I use a proper name such as ‘Arthur Dent’. But my use of the title (‘Boss’ or ‘the boss’) shows that I assume that this individual is *a* boss, or at least that he’s like a boss, or is the agent of a boss. Since every title is also a kind term or descriptive phrase, it is very natural to use titles as names for different individuals in different contexts. With sports teams, the head coach, and any number of assistant coaches may all be addressed as ‘Coach’.

Interestingly, even proper names are quite naturally used to refer to various individuals. At his child’s football match, when his son (star of the team) scores again, a proud father exclaims ‘David Beckham does it again!’ even though the boy’s name is not ‘David Beckham’. In saying this, the father reveals his assumption that the boy is relevantly like Beckham (i.e. he’s a dominating player).

The English ‘God’ is a title which is nowadays practically a proper name. If we say of a crazy person that ‘she thinks she is God’, we may mean that she absurdly believes herself to be identical to Yahweh. But the word is at most a quasi-name, and is still a title as well. We might also mean that the crazy woman thinks she is a god, and the question ‘Is God the only god?’ isn’t incoherent. In New Testament times, the Greek *theos* (both with and without the definite article) was more of a title than the English ‘God’. This is just to say that it was less unusual to use it to refer to beings other than the God of the Jews. Though often it functions as a name for Yahweh, it is also used to refer to men, the gods of polytheism, the devil, and Jesus Christ. (Jn 10:33-35, Acts 12:22, Acts 19:26, 2 Cor 4:4, Jn 20:28)

In my argument prior to the objections, I threw together proper names and titles. I said that in the New Testament the title ‘God’ (‘our God’ ‘the God’, etc.) normally refers to the individual Yahweh. These writers, then, assume that $g = y$. I further said that it is clear from commonplace principles of interpreting texts that the titles ‘God’ and ‘Father’ refer to the same individual. It follows that our authors believe that $g = f$, and thus, $g = f = y$. This rules out ST, for on ST g isn’t identical to anything, as there is no individual named by ‘God’.¹³ We might say loosely that according to ST, $g = (f, s, h)$, but that is incoherent, since identity is a one-one relation, and can never be a one-many relation (since it is a *reflexive* relation which necessarily, everything bears only to itself). In sum, ‘God’ and ‘Father’ (etc.) aren’t quite proper names in the New Testament, but since they usually function in the manner of names (i.e. picking out an individual so that something may be asserted about it) my previous argument works.

This brings us to the second objection. I’ll grant (and *not* only for the sake of argument) that a number of times the word *theos* is used in reference to Jesus Christ.¹⁴ What is being asserted or assumed? First, it isn’t being asserted that Jesus, the Son of God, just is God ($s = g$) or that Jesus just is Yahweh ($s = y$). For one thing, the New Testament writers assign some features, to Yahweh/God (i.e. sending his Son) which they don’t assign to and would deny of Jesus, and vice versa (i.e. obeying and praying to God, being crucified). Charity requires that we try to find a consistent interpretation of any writer we read, and a writer who *identifies* x and y and then says they have different properties is simply contradicting himself. Also, no one can consistently identify Jesus with the individual Yahweh/God, so long as her theology asserts that there are three persons

‘in’ the latter, but denies that there are three persons ‘in’ the former. So why, then, would people call Jesus ‘God’ (Jn 1:1, 1:18) or address him as ‘my Lord and my God’? (Jn 20:28)

That is very much a matter of dispute. Latin trinitarians think that first century Christians view Jesus as sharing one individual essence with the Father. Social trinitarians read them as attributing a single universal essence and necessarily congruent wills to Christ and his Father. Unitarians and Arians argue that the writers are assuming that Jesus is the unique agent of his Father, and/or that he is qualitatively similar to his Father. Others read the New Testament as assuming that the Father and Son are constituted by one and the same quantity of ‘God-stuff’, a kind of quasi-matter.¹⁵ A central New Testament teaching is that the Son is like the Father. As Paul says, the son is ‘the image of the invisible God’ and is ‘in the form of God’ (Col 1:15, Phil 2:6; cf. 2 Cor 4:4), and they’re so alike that if you know what the Son is like, you know what the Father is like (Jn 14:6-11), and Jesus and his Father are ‘one’. (Jn 17) Despite much special pleading all around, these claims don’t *obviously* decide between the feuding interpretations just mentioned, though that doesn’t mean that such passages are equally friendly to all sides.

But for present purposes, we needn’t decide the debate. It may be that one of the above (LT, ST, Unitarianism, Arianism, hylomorphic trinitarianism) is true, or that they are all false. It doesn’t matter, for it is in any case clear that the New Testament writers use a variety of titles to pick out the individual Yahweh, including ‘God’, ‘the Lord’, and ‘the Father’. Some of these are also used for Jesus Christ, such as ‘God’ and ‘the Lord’. They may in this usage reveal a conviction that Christ has a very high functional and/or ontological status indeed, and this may or may not ‘move

Christ inside the Godhead’, so to speak. But what is clear is that they affirm things of Christ which they don’t affirm and would deny of Yahweh/God, and vice-versa, and they never use ‘God’ in a way that should be read as referring to the group of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this is enough for a second argument against ST.

Therefore, the second and more powerful deception argument against social trinitarianism is as follows. If ST is true and the apostolic teaching was divinely inspired, at least one of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, induced (at least) John, Paul, Peter (dare we add Jesus Christ?) to identify God and the Father. Remember that according to ST, God is *not* identical to the Father; ‘God’ doesn’t name an individual, but is a term for a unique and closely united *group* of three divinities. If God and the Father *aren’t* identical, then inducing belief that they *are* is imprudent and/or immoral. Hence on the supposition of ST, at least one divine being engaged in an act of deception that was imprudent and/or immoral. But divine beings don’t do that. Hence, ST is false.

As with the previous argument, we can’t be completely certain that such a deception would be immoral, or that it would be imprudent. But the act of sowing such an important confusion in the apostolic teaching certainly seems to be both. We should note that this (according to ST) confusion lasted far beyond the apostolic era. This identification of God and the Father, with the telltale interchangeable usage of terms, persisted as the norm for some time. Thus in the so-called Apostle’s Creed we read ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty...’. And the Council of Nicea (325) proclaimed that ‘We believe in One God, the Father almighty... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father...’.

Useful falsehoods?

There remains a reply to both deception arguments which turns on the differences between the Holy Three and the three men in the story of the second section of this paper. The reply is as follows. *Let's grant that both Old and New Testament revelation involved intentional deception. Still, special circumstances render this a permissible, or even an obligatory action. The Holy Three are uniquely unified in a way that no other threesome is. Functionally, they are like a single divine person, and they share a wonderful corporate life together, of a depth not seen in earthly relationships. The 'Yahweh' character was introduced because doing so was less misleading than revealing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Especially in the context of ancient polytheism, people would have tended to think of the three as rivals, and set up competing traditions and cults, as we see in Hinduism, or in various ancient polytheistic schemes. Or short of this, they would have thought of the Three as being more like three men – perhaps friends, but without access to one another's thoughts, and with the relational barriers that separate humans one from another. Hence the Three justifiably 'revealed' themselves as the one god, until the time was right.*¹⁶

This reply is unpromising. First, why couldn't ancient people have understood the notion of three deities who work together perfectly, and whose wills are perfectly in harmony? There is nothing terribly difficult about understanding three beings who love one another, and perfectly cooperate in

all they do. We can scarcely imagine what it would be like to be one of the Three, but we surely can understand the claim that there are three such deities. Ancient people were not stupid; presumably, they could have understood this as well, though we can admit that they would have been tempted to think of the three as rivals. In revealing themselves, the Three need only have emphasized their functional unity; introduction of the fictional ‘Yahweh’ seems unnecessary and wrong. But one may object: *three wills in harmony is one thing, but three wills necessarily in harmony is another. Ancient people were unequipped to understand this latter doctrine.*¹⁷ In reply, many ancient people were not unequipped, and those that were could have easily been taught. It is true that no ancient person would understand a claim put in modern lingo, such as: ‘In all possible worlds, and for any x, the Father wills x if and only if the Son wills x.’ But they could have easily understood less precise formulations, such as ‘The Father and Son can’t disagree’ or ‘Because of their essential natures, the Father and Son are unable to disagree.’ Further, whenever it was that the ST proponent thinks that that charade was dropped (in New Testament times, Patristic times, or in recent analytic philosophy of religion), she can’t specify something crucially different about that time, as opposed to the days of the patriarchs or the prophets. Thus the reply looks *ad hoc*, appealing only because it can save the cherished ST account.

Not so fast, comes the reply, *what made it appropriate for the charade to be dropped was the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This opened people’s eyes to the possibility that the God of the Jews could become a man. Having accepted this previously inconceivable fact, people were then ready to make the transition to ST.*¹⁸ Several things can be said in reply. First, according

to ST, it wasn't 'God', but rather, one of the three divine beings composing the group 'God' who became a human. Second, by way of concession, I think that the life of Christ (or if one is skeptical about the historicity of the Gospels, *what was written about* the life of Christ) did startle people with the claim that a divine being became a human and walked among us. This did force people to re-evaluate their theology, and specifically their understanding of how God relates to humankind (it turns out, the New Testament teaches, that he relates to us through a mediator, his unique Son). It may also be that many Jews thought that a divine being couldn't become human (it depends, I think, on what one means by the then and now slippery term 'divine') but that the life of Christ showed converts to Christianity that what they previously thought impossible was both possible and actual. But third, granting these facts, I see no solace in them for defenders of ST. The objector, I hope, isn't claiming that the event of Christ's life changed the basic intellectual faculties humans enjoy. In this respect, it seems, ancient and modern people are alike. But then, the following could have been explained to them circa 200 B.C.E.: 'the one "God" is in fact a closely and essentially united community of three divine beings.'

The objector may reply: *it was better to not reveal this truth until the Son and Holy Spirit were understood to be persons distinct from the Father. Why make the stated revelation, unless one has already introduced, or is about to introduce the previously concealed divine persons? Suppose a mother announces to her four children that unbeknownst to them, they have two more siblings, which she had given away for adoption before the final four were born. If she has kept track of them, it might be unnecessarily cruel to do this without immediately revealing who, that is, which*

two people these 'new' siblings are. I agree that there may be a moral reason to link the revealing of the existence of further divine persons to the revealing of these persons as distinctive individuals, with particular features, and playing specific roles in history and in the divine plan. Nonetheless, this doesn't help ST. It may be that the two revelations just mentioned should happen together, that is, temporally near. But then the problem of deception is still with us, stronger than ever: why didn't the Father reveal the existence of his Son and Holy Spirit earlier? Why the deception?

Note that we've just slipped into talking as if the God of the Jews is the same individual as the Father. As we've seen, this way of thinking about the Father pervades the New Testament, but it is not consistent with ST, which holds that 'God' and 'Yahweh' aren't names for the Father, but are rather disguised plural referring expressions referring to a collection of three things, one of which is the Father. There is trouble here for ST. Proponents consider ST a deeply biblical view because of the exalted view of Christ it includes, but we'll see below that ST is in fact incompatible with central New Testament claims, whatever one says about the divinity of Christ.

In sum, the above objections remind us that revelation or communication of the complete truth about some matter may be imprudent in certain circumstances. Presumably, there is a good reason why the Son and Holy Spirit are not (clearly) revealed until New Testament times. But if the above concern about ancient polytheism is legitimate, that gives the Three a reason not to falsely portray themselves as the one God (as ST has it), but rather for the Three to reveal themselves sequentially, one after the other. Indeed, this is precisely what happened on the reading of the Bible advocated here. First, God reveals himself. Later on, he reveals that he has a Son and a Holy Spirit. Through

these two, in different ways, the Father further reveals his own character. (Cf. Heb 1:1-3, Jn 14)

This is the scriptural picture of progressive revelation of the Three. In contrast to ST, in this picture there are no fictional characters and there is no wrongful or imprudent deception.

Were the New Testament writers confused?

Some will respond to the second deception argument by happily accepting that the New Testament writers are confused about these matters, holding inconsistent, vague, or simply false beliefs, though since then we've sorted these matters out. John, Paul, (and Jesus?) stumbled in the dark, but now in the noonday light of later tradition we all see clearly what the doctrine of the Trinity should be.

This is wrongheaded. While it is true that for a long time most Christians have been unwilling to reopen the issue of the Trinity, this is not quite because some common understanding has been reached. Common words, phrases, and habits of thought and speech have been settled upon, principally those of the Council of Constantinople (380 C.E.) and of the so-called Athanasian Creed, but there is no universally held interpretation of those words, representing some breakthrough of understanding or consensus of thought.¹⁹ These documents were designed to rule out certain views (principally Arianism and modalism), but aren't themselves understood in any standard, nearly uniform way. It is widely agreed that the theory should be monotheistic but

incompatible with Jewish and Muslim monotheism, but believers are not so clear on the positive content of the doctrine.

This fact of smoothed-over disagreement is evidenced by the existence of certain types of Christians: (1) contemporary ST theorists who are thoughtful, informed about the history of the doctrine, and of a basically conservative theological orientation,²⁰ (2) the great mass of theologians and ordinary believers who confess the standard words but are in fact modalists, or who mix modalistic thinking with something incompatible with it, (3) those thoughtful Christians who ping-pong back and forth between a modalistic and a tritheistic understanding of the standard formulae, and (4) lovers of mystery, from many quarters, who love the obscurity of the traditional formulae, and take this obscurity as a mark of profundity (they simply don't interpret the formulae, at least in some moods, and think that is how one properly relates to them).²¹ Even if one thinks that some historical figure, say Athanasius, Aquinas, or Jonathan Edwards, had it right, it remains a fact that several incompatible ways of thinking about the Trinity are alive and well within the orthodox camp, however one defines the orthodox camp (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal, all of these, or some subset of them). Thus the 'we've all figured it out now' is a way of putting one's head in the sand upon the appearance of a real, widespread disagreement which is a painfully confusing issue for some thinking Christians.

In my view a Christian ought to think hard before declaring the apostles (and according to them, Jesus Christ himself) confused about who or what God is. Their mission, traditional Christians believe, included revealing the God of the Jews more fully than before, and they were specially

qualified for this task.²² Christ, we are told, existed with God before his birth (Jn 1:2, 8:58, 17:5), and had a uniquely close relationship with him during his earthly life. The apostles witnessed his life firsthand before and after his resurrection, and were personally chosen by him to spread his message, which he claimed was God's message as well. In short, Christians believe that Christ and his disciples were instruments of divine revelation. One needn't think that *all* of their beliefs were true, but Christians take them to be (at least) reliable sources of information about God. This includes their explicit teaching and important theses they assume therein. Viewed in this light, it seems foolhardy for a Christian to think that they were confused about the identity of God. The present suggestion, remember, isn't that their beliefs were undeveloped, metaphysically imprecise, or somewhat vague. Rather, the suggestion at hand is that they were simply mistaken to identify God and the Father, whereas we now know that 'God' is just the collection of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A Christian who accepts the inspiration and basic reliability of the exact apostolic writings will think hard before pronouncing them all mistaken on such an important matter.

The Direct Argument Against ST

Having thought through concerns about deception and ST, we saw that a barrier to the acceptance of ST is the New Testament teaching that the Father and God are one and the same individual. This yields a direct argument against ST which works quite independently of deception

concerns.

Let y name Yahweh, the one true God presented in the Old Testament. Let g be the God of the New Testament. Let f be the Father of Jesus Christ, and s and h be the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, respectively.

$$(1) \quad y = g$$

$$(2) \quad g = f$$

$$(3) \quad y = f$$

$$(4) \quad f \neq (f,s,h)$$

$$(5) \quad g \neq (f,s,h)$$

$$(6) \quad y \neq (f,s,h)$$

(1) is assumed throughout the New Testament, and by all later Christians as well. For them, God just is Yahweh, who befriended Abraham and spoke to Moses and the prophets. (2) is assumed and implicitly taught by all of the main New Testament authors, as I've argued above. (3) follows from (1) and (2) by the transitivity of identity. We know (4) is true because as f , s , h have different properties, it follows from the indiscernibility of identicals that $f \neq s \neq h$. It is self-evident that no individual can be identical to the collection or mereological sum of itself and two other things. (5) and (6) follow by the indiscernibility of identicals, and they tell us that ST is false. Thus, there is a solid argument against ST even apart from concerns about deception.

The only hope of ST proponents defending against the above argument is to deny (2). Denying (1) isn't an option. And if (2) is admitted, the rest undeniably follows. But as we've seen, to deny (2) is to fight against the primary texts on which Trinitarian theorizing is supposed to be based. It seems that (after being instructed in using the logical symbols '=' and '≠') Christ, his apostles, and their immediate students would accept the direct argument just given.

Conclusion

Many questions remain. Does the direct argument refute just ST, or all versions of trinitarian doctrine? How does the belief that God is the Father fit in to the later trinitarian traditions of the middle ages? If ST isn't the right form of trinitarianism, then is there one? What about Yahweh insisting on his own absolute uniqueness through prophets in the Old Testament – can this be squared with the claim that the Son of God is like God, or is it an act of (possibly wrongful) deception? These are important but complex and difficult questions which I won't try to answer here.

In conclusion, we've refuted the pessimistic but common belief that there is no hope of progress in theorizing about the Trinity. One kind of progress is ruling out plausible options. ST is theoretically beautiful because of its consistency and clarity, and its acknowledgement of the numerical distinctness of the three divine persons. The first deception argument highlights that ST

implicates at least one of the Three in what looks like wrongful deception. This casts doubt on, but doesn't decisively refute ST. The second deception argument shows why ST theorists can't take refuge in the claim that it is the overall best reading of the New Testament. To the contrary, it is inconsistent with something implicitly taught in the New Testament. The third, direct argument, shows how the New Testament straightforwardly implies the falsity of ST. The kind of ST we are exploring is simply a dead-end. Seeing this enables us to turn around and explore other paths.²³

Notes (self-identifying references omitted for blind review)

¹. C. Stephen Layman ‘Tritheism and Trinity’, *Faith and Philosophy* **5** (1988), 291-298, esp. 293-295; Cornelius Plantinga ‘The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity’, *Calvin Theological Journal* **23** (1988), 37-53, esp. 50-53; *idem* ‘Social Trinity and Tritheism’ in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga (eds) *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21-47, esp. 27-37; Richard Swinburne *The Christian God* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 180-189. I have the greatest respect for these authors, who are clear-headed and bold enough to make claims about the Trinity that are understandable and therefore in principle refutable. Many who consider themselves Social Trinitarians are not by the understanding of ST adopted here. In recent trinitarian literature there is much talk of ‘the social analogy’, but authors often take back with one hand what they give with the other. They say that God is in some way like three persons or three men, but deny that God contains three distinct minds, centers of consciousness, wills, or thinking things (persons). I don’t understand such claims, and so will not address them here. Other professed social trinitarians think of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as parts or components of the one God. Unlike ST as defined in this paper, for them ‘God’ names an individual (rather than a mere group of individuals). For this other kind of Social Trinitarianism, see J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 575-595. In my view this approach faces severe problems. For these, see Daniel Howard-Snyder ‘Trinity Monotheism’, *Philosophia Christi* (forthcoming)

². ST theorists say other things about how the three are related, e.g. that ontological dependence relations obtain between them, and that the three enjoy personal relationships unparalleled in depth and intimacy. Some of these claims will be discussed below; here I’m simply highlighting the theoretical clarity of the core of ST. Unlike most versions of Latin Trinitarianism, ST can never be confused with modalism.

³. Many find ST attractive for non-theoretical reasons, specifically, for its alleged practical consequences. Many believe that ST (and/or many other theses that go by the name ‘social trinitarianism’ – see note 1 above) has important implications for family life, interpersonal relationships generally, or even politics. Suppose that ST implies p , and p is a practically important truth which if widely followed would lead to some wonderful result. Even if this is so, the truth of p & $(ST \supset p)$ in no way supports belief in ST; that is the common fallacy of affirming the consequent. For the truth of p to support ST, we’d have to add that $(p \supset ST)$ – that p is true *only if* ST is true - and I suggest that in many cases this is hard to demonstrate.

⁴. On Latin Trinitarianism see Brian Leftow ‘A Latin Trinity’, *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming); *idem* ‘Anti Social Trinitarianism’ in Stephen T. Davis, David Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (eds) *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203-249, esp. 203-204

⁵. Jeffrey E. Brower ‘The Problem with Social Trinitarianism: A Reply to Edward Wierenga’, *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming); Kelly James Clark ‘Trinity or Tritheism?’, *Religious Studies* **32** (1996), 463-476; Daniel Howard-Snyder ‘Trinity Monotheism’; Leftow ‘Anti Social Trinitarianism’;

⁶. Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁷. I’m well aware of the old game of hunting for trinitarian clues, ‘indications’, hints, or anticipations in Old Testament texts. Thus, God refers to himself as plural, saying ‘Let us make man in our own image’ (Gen 1:26) and there is this business of ‘the angel of the LORD’. All I want to say about these passages here is that their meanings are unclear, whereas the passages I cited just now are clear. The texts I have cited suffice to make my charge stick, that if ST were true, the three divinities would have intentionally deceived the Jews by masquerading as one divinity.

⁸. I assume in what follows that a Christian has adequate reason to believe ST only if the New Testament, properly interpreted, is consistent with and supports ST. Richard Swinburne offers an interesting *a priori* argument that if there is one divinity, there must be exactly three. (Swinburne *The Christian God*, 170-180) This argument, if sound, is not enough to establish ST, but only that there are exactly three divine individuals. ST requires the further claims that these three divinities are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of the New Testament, and that this community is the referent of ‘God’ and ‘Yahweh’ (etc.) in the Bible. I sidestep Swinburne’s argument, then, because I think that the reflections of the next section are sufficient to prove that ST isn’t known or even believed on strong grounds.

⁹. As my qualifier ‘barring strange circumstances’ indicates, I realize that my two conditions aren’t logically sufficient to guarantee that the author thinks that $x = y$. What we have here is an inference to the best explanation, not a valid deductive argument. Still, it seems to me that we are quite often *very* certain about these judgments, and rightly so. (E.g. ‘Christ’ = ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, ‘Tully’ = ‘Cicero’, ‘Dubya’ = ‘George W. Bush’)

¹⁰. I’ll assume the traditional authors of the New Testament books here, and that Jesus’ words are accurately represented (by ancient standards). I don’t see, though, that any of my arguments in this paper depend on these assumptions; it is good enough if the New Testament books, or most of them, fairly accurately represent the teaching of the apostles and/or their associates, and less directly and less clearly, that of Christ.

¹¹. See Murray Harris *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992) for a thorough discussion of the texts in which Christ may be called *theos*. His verdict (49, 271-272) is that in only six verses in the New Testament can ‘Certainly’ or ‘Very Probably’ be read as applying the term *theos* to Christ. He also makes a compelling case that throughout the New Testament, *theos* almost always refers to the Father. (40-50)

¹². This cluster of objections comes from some helpful critical comments by an anonymous reader for this journal, together with some things said in Harris *Jesus as God*, 270-299.

¹³. I remind the reader that ST as defined here excludes the view that God is an individual, namely, a complex one with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three parts. See note 1 above.

¹⁴. Harris' list of passages where where *theos* is certainly or probably used in reference to Christ is: Jn 1:1, 1:18, 20:28; Rom 9:5; Tit 2:13; Heb 1:8; 2 Pet 1:1. (Harris *Jesus as God*, 49, 271) I'd dispute a few of these, but here I'll assume for sake of argument that he's right about all of them.

¹⁵. For a defense of this ancient but now rare kind of trinitarianism, see Michael C. Rea and Jeffrey E. Brower, 'Material Constitution and the Trinity' *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

¹⁶. I thank _____ for suggesting this objection.

¹⁷. My thanks to an anonymous reader for this journal for pressing this objection.

¹⁸. I thank an anonymous reader for this journal and its editor for raising and pressing something like this objection in correspondence.

¹⁹. Further, I have argued elsewhere that

²⁰. All of the ST proponents cited in footnote 1 above are examples of this type.

²¹. For more on the rationality of appeals to mystery in this context, see

²². A prominent ST theorist holds a bold and carefully crafted account of divine revelation from which it follows that most of my claims in this paragraph are wrong-headed. (Richard Swinburne *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992).) I have no comparably developed model of revelation to offer, and must plead that in any case it would take a longish article to explain and rebut Swinburne's model of divine revelation. Here I will only say two things. First, I do presuppose that the New Testament teaching fairly accurately represents the teaching of some of the apostles and their immediate circles of followers. Second, I share several of the worries expressed by reviewers of Swinburne's book. (Peter Byrne 'A Defence of Christian Revelation' [Review of *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*], *Religious Studies*, **29** (1993), 381-395; George Mavrodes '[Review of] *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **34** (1993), 189-191; Eleonore Stump '[Review of] *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*', *Philosophical Review*, **103** (1994), 739-743.)

²³. My thanks to

_____ for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.