

## On the Possibility of a Single Perfect Person

### 1. Introduction

Most trinitarians believe that God is a Trinity based on the Bible and/or the testimony of the mainstream Christian theological tradition. But a few philosophers have argued that another sort of evidence is available, offering arguments from reason alone. There is a twofold motivation here. First, most Christians would like it to be the case that there's support for what their tradition says about God from another, independent quarter, from philosophy. Secondly, mainstream Christians would like to show how their doctrine of God is superior to that of other religious theists, such as Jews, Muslims, and unitarian Christians. These sorts of argument were never thought of in biblical or patristic times; they are the offspring of Anselmian perfect being speculation. I shall argue that we know of no such cogent argument.<sup>1</sup>

The core idea of these philosophical trinitarians is that it is impossible for there to be a solitary divine person. Hence, if there is at least one divine person, there must be at least two. Thus, we're two-thirds of the way to a Trinity of divine persons. It is not clear how one can as it were stop the process of multiplication, so as to show that there *at most* three.<sup>2</sup> I lay this issue aside, as I shall argue that the project never gets off the ground. No one has shown that there can't be a solitary divine person, and whoever thinks theism to be possible, should also think it is possible for there to be only one divine person.

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1 This essay is dedicated to Stephen T. Davis, in gratefulness for his instruction, friendship, example, and scholarly work, all of which have taught me much.

2 See the hesitant presentation in Swinburne 1994, 179, and the forceful objection by Leftow, (1999, 239-241), which is not properly addressed in Swinburne 2008, 33.

The method of Anselmian theology is to assume that a divine being is an absolutely perfect being. We then reason about how an absolutely perfect being must or could not be. But what exactly about absolute perfection rules out there being a single divine person?

## 2. Divine Happiness

Arguably, an absolutely perfect being could not fail to be well off; in classical terminology, a perfect being must be happy, flourishing, in a “blessed” condition. Part of absolute perfection is independence. One kind of independence is the kind which comes up when discussing ontological or cosmological arguments for God’s existence - the idea of aseity, or existing *a se*, through or because of oneself, and not because of anything else. But here’s another kind of independence or self-sufficiency: not requiring any thing (i.e. any fact not entailed by your existence) to be well off, to have an abundantly good life. Perhaps we could call it the divine property of independent happiness.

Is God as well off as he could possibly be? Arguably not, for people thwart his will all the time. He’d be better off if his will were always done. But if he’s self-sufficient in the above sense, he’d be well off even if no human had ever responded to his grace.<sup>3</sup> Following an ancient tradition, we think of happiness as a sort of fullness or completeness, but not of maximal or greatest possible of well-being.<sup>4</sup> (Compare with our concepts of health and sanity.) Happiness doesn’t require having no unsatisfied desires. Any conscious agent experiences an ever changing stream of unfulfilled desires, which give it motives to act. And arguably, being free requires having unfulfilled desires, because it requires having conflicting desires – desires which are motives for multiple, incompatible actions.

If God must be well off, then he couldn’t ever be lonely, in a happiness-depriving (life-ruining)

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3 I’m an open theist; unlike other theists, I believe that God literally takes risks as he rules over his creation. But if God is necessarily self-sufficient, then he never risks his own well-being, even if open theism is true.

4 It seems to me that the concept of the greatest possible level of well-being is contradictory, like the notion of a highest possible positive integer. For any level of well-being God might enjoy – either at a time, in timeless eternity, or throughout the whole temporal extent of his life – he might be a little better off, say, by beholding one more beautiful, happy creature. But my argument here doesn’t depend on this claim.

sense. He could want fellowship with Hitler and not get it, and suffer because of Hitler's rebellion, but this suffering would be compatible with his being thoroughly well off. One might say that divine serenity is large enough to absorb all such pains. Further, a perfect being can't be anything like an emotional cripple, or some emotionally desperate single parent, who in a sickly way needs the friendship of his small children. He of course deeply wants it, and has taken great steps to secure it. His having a good life, though, doesn't depend on our cooperation, whether individually or collectively. But why is this so?

It'll be some fact about, or implied by, God's essential nature. One candidate would be, that God essentially "contains" multiple "persons" or something like persons. God can't be lonely because he can't be alone - he always, in any possible circumstance, enjoys these multiple friends "in" or perhaps with him. In any possible world, God exists, and is never alone, but always with these other (somehow internal) relationship-worthy things.

Sometimes, in conjunction with this idea, it's urged that a "merely unipersonal" God, or a "unitarian" God like that of the Jews, Muslims, and Christian unitarians, would be imperfect, because he'd possibly be alone, without these internal or necessarily accompanying "others". These poor confused theists, the thought goes, have an incoherent notion of God. They *say* their God is perfect, but their belief that God is (or in some sense contains) only one self logically implies that their God *isn't* perfect. Only a social trinitarian God, it is urged, is perfect, because only it (he?) can be self-sufficient, as explained above.

Well, not so fast. Why couldn't a "unipersonal" God exist alone, and yet be well off, not lacking any good which is necessary for his being happy? Yes, he'd be capable of loving another, but in the scenario we're imagining he wouldn't actually have such a relationship. He would be lacking any kind of other-love. And he'd want that sort of love. But why couldn't God be so serene, so complete in himself that he could simply "absorb" this lack, happiness intact? (Don't think of it as a loss - we're

supposing God never created in the first place.) After all, a perfect being, being omniscient and omnipotent, would be aware on an infinite array of possible good things he could create, like zebras and unicorns, each of which he would have a desire to create, because they are objectively good things. If this vast array of unobtained goods wouldn't doom him to unhappiness, why think that the great good of loving another, of enjoying person-to-person love, would so doom him? He'd still have all his intrinsic perfections, including perfect awareness of his own glorious self, a stupendously good and beautiful being. Why think he *needs* anything else, that is, needs anything else to be well off, happy?

A seductive line of thought is this. Man, as Aristotle said, is a social animal. It is unnatural for a human to live outside a human community. A man or woman could survive alone, but would not thrive and flourish. A lack of relationships, before too long, badly warps any fully developed human, and prevents the proper development of any immature human. Human happiness requires friendship, and more than that, being embedded within, and functioning as a part of a nurturing human society.

That's all well and good. But what does this have to do with God? Maybe the idea is this:

S1. God made humans in his image and likeness. premise - Genesis 1-2

S2. Therefore, God is similar to a human, and vice-versa. S1

S3. Humans can't be well off without personal (non-reflexive) relationships.      premise

S4. Therefore, probably, God can't be well off without personal (non-reflexive) relationships. S1-S3

This strikes me as a very weak argument by analogy. I agree with S1-S3. But God (i.e. the Father) doesn't have a body. He doesn't need touch, or the sights, sounds, and smells of others. He's always everywhere. He's never afraid, and never lacking in knowledge. He knows nothing could ever destroy him. He never needs to whistle in the dark to reassure himself. He's never overcome with dread, never paranoid. He's never suicidal (and not just because deicide is a logical impossibility - but because he's never that hopeless). He never feels like he's in a world spinning out of his control because, well, he

never is. He doesn't need his mommy. In sum, we have no relevant experience, and no other sort of evidence, for thinking that a god is a social animal - i.e. that a divine being can't flourish without being in a loving relationship with another. We human persons are very fragile and dependent beings. But I see nothing in the concept of person (self, personal agent, thinking thing, rational substance) that entails requiring the love of others to be happy. (I grant that full-blown persons are by definition *capable* of being in personal relationships.) In sum, the only reason I can conjure for thinking that a perfect being must actually love another to be well off involves a fallacy of anthropomorphism. And while being perfect requires being happy, and not dependently, being perfect doesn't require having as good a life as one could possibly have.

Why accept that an absolutely perfect being doesn't need anything else to exist in a fullness of utterly secure bliss? It is plausible to think that independent happiness is a great-making property. Imagine that you could be rendered incapable of unhappiness – not incapable of pain, suffering, regret, and so on, but rather incapable of failing to be well-off, failing to enjoy completeness of well-being. You'd still value all kinds of love, but you'd now be capable of greater (rationally pursued) risks in the pursuit of love; any losses you might suffer would leave you still well off. You'd be able to absorb any loss, happiness intact. As you sought various loves, you would never risk life-ruining harm. If you could gain this attribute of being self-sufficient with regard to your own well-being, you'd be a greater, more perfect being than you now are. And there's no reason to limit this to human, or to finite beings. Hence, an absolutely perfect being must have this attribute as well.

We could summarize our discussion as follows. Some reason as follows.

- |                                                  |         |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------|
| H1. A lone god must be a lonely and unhappy god. | Premise |
| H2. But a perfect being couldn't be unhappy.     | Premise |
| H3. Therefore, a lone god wouldn't be perfect.   | H1, H2  |
| H4. A god is by definition perfect.              | Premise |

H5. It is impossible for there to be a lone god.

H3, H4

As we've seen, though, there's no reason to believe H1, and further, there is reason to believe H1 is false. I conclude that there's nothing we know about divine happiness or well-being from which we can conclude that there can't be a single divine person.

### 3. Perfection in Love

But Christian philosophers and theologians have focused more attention on another aspect of perfection: being perfect in love, or perfectly loving. I take the core argument to be this:<sup>5</sup>

L1. Necessarily, there is a perfect being.	Premise
L2. Necessarily, if a being is perfect, it enjoys peer love.	Premise
L3. Necessarily, there is a perfect being who enjoys peer love.	L1, L2
L4. If necessarily, a perfect being enjoys peer love, then either a perfect being necessarily creates a peer whom he loves, or necessarily, there is another uncreated being whom he loves.	Premise

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<sup>5</sup> While this argument is mine, it was inspired by the carefully wrought argument by Stephen Davis, quoted below. The formal structure of my argument is as follows.

$Px = x$  is a perfect being.

$Lx = x$  has peer love.

$C(x,y) = x$  creates  $y$ .

$R(x,y) = x$  and  $y$  stand in a relation of peer love.

L1.  $\Box \exists x Px$

L2.  $\Box \forall x (Px \supset Lx)$

L3.  $\Box \exists x (Px \wedge Lx)$

L4.  $\Box \exists x (Px \wedge Lx) \supset ((\Box \exists x \exists y (x \neq y \wedge C(x,y) \wedge R(x,y))) \vee (\Box \exists x \exists y (x \neq y \wedge \neg C(x,y) \wedge R(x,y))))$

L5.  $\neg \Box \exists x \exists y (x \neq y \wedge \neg C(x,y) \wedge R(x,y))$

L6.  $\Box \exists x \exists y (x \neq y \wedge C(x,y) \wedge R(x,y))$

Davis's argument is:

1. Necessarily, God is perfect, and perfect in love.
2. Necessarily, if God does not experience love of another, God is imperfect.
3. Therefore, necessarily, God experiences love of another. (1,2)
4. Necessarily, it is possible that only God exists (i.e. that God does not create).
5. Necessarily, if ST [social trinitarianism] is false, there is no 'other' in the Godhead.
6. Necessarily, if God alone exists, and if ST is false, then God does not experience love of another, and thus is not perfect. (2,4,5)
7. Therefore, necessarily, ST is true. (4,6) (Davis 2006, 65.)

L5. Necessarily, it is not the case that the perfect being necessarily creates a peer to love. Premise

L6. Therefore, necessarily, a perfect being enjoys the love of an uncreated peer. L4, L5

“Peer love” is a kind of interpersonal relationship between friends who in some sense regard one another as equals. An ideal marriage implies peer love, as does the friendship of “best friends”. Loves which are not peer love would include parent-child love, boss-employee love, and the friendship between the compassionate popular cheerleader and the unpopular girl. Although one is equal to oneself, by definition peer-love can’t be reflexive; it is a species of other-love.<sup>6</sup>

I shall argue that no one has ever given a good reason to believe L2, and that any theist ought to deny L2. First, some preliminary comments. L1 is assumed here. I think a theist is on decently solid ground in believing the other premises. Consider L4; if in all possible worlds, God loves a peer, then there must in each possible world be some available peer, which either was created by God, or not. Presumably it doesn’t just randomly exist; hence the only other possibility would be that it, like God, is a necessary being. A wily metaphysician could raise worries about this premise, but I won’t challenge it. Premise L5 is plausible; most theists want to say that God is essentially free, and that God could have refrained from creating anything at all. While this premise can be challenged, I shall leave it alone, because premise L2 has enough troubles to sink the argument.

The first question to ask about L2 is this: exactly what is it about absolute perfection which

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6 It is worth asking why, of the various kinds of love, peer-love has been singled out. One answer would be that it is *peers* for the Father, and not any lesser friends, which the “social” trinitarian is trying to deduce from the Father’s existence. But another answer would be that a number of Christian thinkers, following Richard of St. Victor, find it plausible that peer-love is the best or highest kind of love. Thus, if a perfect must love, he must love in this best or highest way. (Richard of St. Victor 1979, III.2, pp. 374-5) I’m not so sure; peer-love is different in kind, and perhaps has a different kind of value than self-love, or other-love between a superior and an inferior. But I don’t know that one kind is best; it is like asking whether apples are better than oranges. As Thomas Gaston asks, “Why must love be shared to be perfect and why with an equal? (Is it not greater love demonstrated to one who cannot return in kind?)” (Gaston 2009, 169) Indeed, a Christian might think that the greatest known act of love was God’s sending his Son to redeem lowly, undeserving humans, beings (at least prior to redemption) *far* from being his peers. But nothing in my case against *a priori* social Trinity proofs depends on these worries.

requires peer-love? The most popular answer seems to be: perfect *goodness*. Richard Swinburne asserts that “Love must share and love must co-operate in sharing. The best love would share all that it had. A divine individual would see that for him too a best kind of action would be to share and to co-operate in sharing.”<sup>7</sup> He urges that “there [is] an overriding reason for a first divine individual to bring about a second”.<sup>8</sup> Thus a being which is essentially all-knowing and essentially completely good must create another with whom to share what I call peer love; because he can’t avoid doing this, Swinburne calls this creation of a second divine person an “act of essence”.<sup>9</sup> In a footnote he approvingly cites a popular neo-platonic dictum, that “goodness is by its very nature diffusive of itself and so of being.”<sup>10</sup>

Tom Morris echoes this line of thought somewhat more abstractly:

[summarizing Swinburne,] ...one aspect of perfect goodness is perfect love. Now love must have an object... surely, in order to be a fully loving person, any individual must extend his or her love beyond the bounds of self alone. Divine love is not only complete, it is eternal and necessary, so there must exist on the part of God some sharing of love which is both eternal and necessary.<sup>11</sup>

This suggests, Morris continues, that God must create so that his love can be “complete”. And yet, theists want to say that God was free to not create. Morris dubs this “the problem of the lonely God.” He holds that Swinburne solves this problem, by urging that divine perfection requires “sharing love in the deepest and most complete way possible.”<sup>12</sup> The deepest and most complete way of sharing love, Morris says, is “giving being to another from one’s own being”, which, I take it, Morris thinks of as a mysterious origination process which is somehow better than creation *ex nihilo*.

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7 Swinburne 1994, 178.

8 Swinburne 1994, 177.

9 Swinburne 1994, 178.

10 *ibid.*

11 Morris 1991, 177.

12 *ibid.*



Stephen Davis recognizes that the crucial question is: why believe L2? Here's his whole stated reason:

It seems that a God who does not and cannot love another has missed out on something high and wonderful; there would be a deficiency in God. God would be less than perfect. (The same would be true of any great good that can logically be experienced by an omnipotent and perfectly good being; if God were not to experience beauty or justice, that would be a deficiency in God.)<sup>13</sup>

I don't think this establishes L2, although there are important truths near at hand. Love is an important good, and there are kinds of love, some of which, arguably, are more valuable than others. Further, a loving being is motivated to pursue the good of others, and to bring others into the orbit of his love, sometimes by giving existence to new candidates for love.

But Davis's argument would prove too much. It is a great good to be the heavenly Father presiding over a loving community of worshipful human beings. If God didn't create, he'd lack this good. But Davis and I would agree that God *would* nonetheless, sans creation, be perfect. Again, it's a great good to be the source of a gorgeous, amazing cosmos, teeming with life, which one beholds with satisfaction as "very good". But we don't want to say that God would be imperfect if he'd made nothing. There's a *non sequitur* in Davis's reasoning. Were God to have "missed out on something high and wonderful", it doesn't seem to follow that there would be "a deficiency in God". Not all goods, not even all great goods, are such that their absence would render one imperfect. Some goods one doesn't need in order to be perfect.

It is important to remember how strong a claim Swinburne, Morris, and Davis are urging: that what I shall call the Lone God Scenario is *impossible*. Consider it for yourself. Does the following

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<sup>13</sup> Davis 2006, 66-67. Davis is actually arguing for his premise two, in his argument quoted in the footnote above.

scenario seem impossible to you?

*A perfect, divine person exists but doesn't create (or otherwise generate or give existence to) anything else. He's just there, timelessly beholding and loving himself, but not anyone else. He's a perfectly loving being - just as much as he would be were he to whip up some creatures, so as to have an object of love beyond himself. He's all-knowing, and so can perfectly imagine what it's like to love another. But, he doesn't experience an such relationship, as only he exists. This god is perfect, yet perfectly alone.*

What reason have we been given to think the above scenario is impossible? The way one shows a claim to be logically impossible – that is, necessarily false – is by showing how it is *contradictory* to suppose it true. Well then, where is the contradiction? I don't see one. Furthermore, the above scenario positively seems possible. This doesn't *prove* it to be possible (the only way to do that, would be for us be sure that it is actual, and of course, it is not actual, since there *are* created selves), but it does give us reason to think that it is possible. In light of this, social trinitarians cannot just assert that perfect goodness requires being in a peer-love relationship.

We're told that a completely perfect being must be "perfectly loving". I agree. But what is it to be "perfectly loving"? Perfection is a matter of a thing's intrinsic condition<sup>14</sup>, and so the perfection of being perfectly loving is a certain state of character, being disposed to think, feel, and act in loving ways. In principle, it seems that one can be perfectly loving without actually loving perfectly, or without ever actually loving anyone else in any way. When Morris urges "surely, in order to be a fully loving person, any individual must extend his or her love beyond the bounds of self alone", I reply: surely, one can have the character trait of being fully loving without actually loving anyone beyond oneself. From the fact that a being is loving, it doesn't logically follow that she actually loves, and it

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<sup>14</sup> We must remember that "perfections" are supposed to be essential properties of God, and not merely "essential" in the recent sense (a property a being can't exist without having) but also "essential" in the ancient sense, of being part of the what-it-is, being defining features.

doesn't matter if we change this to completely or perfectly loving.

This point may be obscured by the way that humans acquire virtues. We aren't naturally, much less essentially, capable of the best kinds of love. We acquire these capabilities over time, by giving and receiving various kinds of love. So any exceptionally loving human you meet has given and received a lot of love. But this is irrelevant to the case of a being who doesn't, and doesn't need to grow in virtue.

There are plausible claims nearby. If a perfect being were not in any interpersonal relationship, he would be motivated to get into (at least) one, for the simple reason that other-love is more valuable than, or at least valuable in a different way than self-love. And so, a perfect being must have a motive to actually love another, and even to engage in love which goes beyond condescending loves, a love between what are in *some* sense peers. But no one has given us a reason to think that this motive must be acted up by a perfect being. Swinburne simply asserts that this reason is "overriding" (such that one would be irrational and/or immoral to not act on it), and Davis asserts that a being who acted on it would be imperfect. But their strong modal claim needs more than a bare assertion to back it up; one proves a necessary truth by showing that it is contradictory to suppose the claim in question to be false. The burden remains on them, for the Lone God Scenario positively *seems* possible.

#### 4. Perfection in Generosity

In a book review of Swinburne's *Was Jesus God?*, Thomas Gaston asks "why suppose God to be necessarily loving other than that we have defined him in that way?"<sup>15</sup> An obvious answer would be that God is supposed to be the greatest possible being, and that such a being must be perfectly loving, in the sense of possessing the power of and propensity to love, in the highest degrees.<sup>16</sup> But as we've seen, the philosophical social trinitarian needs more, namely that God is necessarily in a love

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<sup>15</sup> Gaston 2009, 169.

<sup>16</sup> And if one were skeptical of the Anselmian way of doing theology, one might argue that an all-knowing and all-powerful being must in this sense be "perfectly loving", and that the Bible and Christian tradition affirm that the one God is both all-knowing and all-powerful.

relationship with another, and not just any other, but with a uncreated peer, equal in status to himself, and so “fully divine”. Davis, Swinburne, and Morris don’t merely *define* God as necessarily being in such a friendship. Rather, they argue that God’s absolute, unsurpassable perfection requires it. But as we’ve seen, while it’s plausible that perfection entails being a loving person, there’s no reason to think it entails being a person in loving relationship with another.

But maybe there’s hope for the social trinitarian; he can argue, more specifically, that an aspect of perfect goodness, perfect generosity, is what entails being in a peer-love relationship. In his most recent discussion Swinburne asserts that “A solitary God would have been an ungenerous god and so no God.”<sup>17</sup> In the context he characterizes a hypothetical lone god as being “bad” and possibly also “selfish”.<sup>18</sup> Ungenerous? Ungenerous to whom? To himself? It’s hard to see why he’d have any obligation to himself to bring about peer-love. Again, it’s hard to imagine a lone god being selfish. Whose interests would he be unresponsive to, his own? Arguably, one can’t have obligations towards any merely possible, non-actual being.

Perhaps there’s a more basic aspect of moral perfection that is entailed by generosity, or by perfect generosity, namely a desire to add goodness to reality. When others are present, this would manifest in the virtue of generosity; one would be inclined to benefit these others. But even were there no others, a being with this desire would have a motive to bring into existence other good beings, who could then enjoy good conditions. And maybe if one had this propensity, which we can call “generosity”, in an unlimited way, one would desire to hold nothing back.

Thus, following Richard of St. Victor, some argue that in this special sense, a perfect being must be “generous”. Such a being would want to share everything he has which can be shared.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Swinburne 2008, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Swinburne 2008, 28-29. Strictly, he applies the term “selfish” to the case of the Father and his eternally caused Son, should they not cause a third peer.

<sup>19</sup> I owe this sort of argument to online discussion with Joseph Jedwab, inspired by his close reading of Richard of St. Victor’s *On the Trinity* chapters 14-19. See “Richard of St. Victor’s *De Trinitate* ch. 14”, <http://trinities.org/blog/archives/1068>. It was also suggested to me by objections from my colleague Stephen Kershner, to the effect that an all-powerful being who didn’t create when it would be no loss to himself would be stingy.

resulting argument is:

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|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| P1. If there were a perfect self, he would be perfectly generous.                                                                            | premise |
| P2. A perfectly generous being desires to share every good he enjoys which can be shared.                                                    | premise |
| P3. There's a good G such that any perfect being must have it, and it is shareable, and if G is shared, there must be another perfect being. | premise |
| P4. If there is a perfect self, there must be another perfect self.                                                                          | P1-P3   |
| P5. Therefore, it is not possible for there to be exactly one perfect self.                                                                  | P4      |

I agree that premises P1 and P2 are plausible. The argument, however, is not valid; it fails at the fourth step. It is consistent to affirm P1-P3 and yet deny P4. To make it valid, we must “strengthen” premise P2, changing it to

P2\* A perfectly generous being shares every good he enjoys which can be shared.

I've found that some philosophers think this is obviously true. I do not. It seems to me that the virtue of perfect generosity would still leave one free to give less than all one could give. Thus, while P2 looks to be true by definition, this one does not. Some philosophers may just *mean* this by “perfectly generous” - it is a term for a being which gives all it can, or at least, all it can without serious cost to itself. But virtues aren't actions; they are underlying tendencies which manifest and explain certain actions. I don't know how to move this issue forward, and I grant that some philosophers have what we can call a metaphysical rather than a moral conception of goodness, one which implies exercising one's powers to spread or increase the goodness beyond oneself and to in some sense “share” one's own goods with other beings. Perhaps one may call such a feature “generosity” or “benevolence”, based on

an analogy to a those virtues. To keep the argument valid, we must interpret “generous” in the same sense in both P2\* and P1. But read in that way, P1 is no longer self-evident. If we had in mind a certain moral virtue, then P1 would be self-evident. But if the feature named “generous” there is really a sort of inevitable propensity to share and add to or increase the goodness, I don’t know whether a perfect being must have *that*. But for the sake of argument, let me grant that he would.

Moving on, there would still be the problem of finding some G that makes P3 true. One might suggest simply the property of being an absolutely perfect being. The problem with this is that it arguably entails existing *a se*. And in principle nothing could have that feature because of something else, including a would be a “sharer” of it. In other words, it is contradictory to suppose a perfect being sharing his perfection with another, given that perfection entails aseity.

The catholic tradition, however, suggests a way to retool this argument, by purging it of Anselmian reasoning. After all, the Nicene creed speaks of the Son of God as being “true God from true God”; if that is so, being a genuine deity needn’t involve existing *a se*. It would seem, then, that a genuine deity needn’t be an absolutely perfect being – if this latter is a coherent concept at all. So let’s try to make an argument based on intuitions about divinity, changing the property of absolute perfection to divinity, and making G in P3 be the property of being divine.

D1. If there were a divine self, he would be perfectly generous.	premise
D2. A perfectly generous being shares every good he enjoys which can be shared.	premise
D3. There’s a good G such that any divine being must have it, and it is shareable, and if G is shared, there must be another divine being.	premise
D4. If there is a divine self, there must be another divine self.	D1-D3

D5. Therefore, it is not possible for there to be one divine self.	D4
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I have the same concern about D1; I don't see any necessary connection between being a god and necessarily sharing and increasing goodness. To the contrary, it seems possible to me that there be a god who simply exists in his own blessed condition, needing nothing.

Again, though, let me grant for the sake of argument D1, and that D2 is true by the current definition of "perfectly generous". What then of the crucial premise D3? Here's a candidate for G: fully knowing the goodness of the first divine self. This is a good which the first divinity, being omniscient, enjoys, and which is arguably shareable. Thus, there must be another omniscient being. But must this being also be divine? I don't know. Why couldn't God make an omniscient angel? For that matter, why must a divine being be omniscient? One we've set aside Anselmian perfect-being reasoning, which understands divinity as being absolutely perfect, this is less than clear. Surely many people have tried to hide things from their gods, say, by avoiding that god's temple or country. It's hard to see any contradiction in the assertion that, for example, there's a god of the sea who is only aware of what occurs in the sea.

But maybe we should understand by "divinity" this property: being Yahweh. This being, according to the Bible, is everywhere, and eternal, and there's no way to as it were hide from his gaze. Thus being Yahweh entails being all-knowing. But *being Yahweh* isn't the sort of property which could possibly be shared with another. It's a contradiction to suppose that a being gives the property of *being itself* to another being.

Perhaps Yahweh has some other features which could in principle be shared with another, and which entail divinity, being a god. But it is hard to see what these could be. Theologian Richard Bauckham argues in a series of papers and a book that Second Temple era Jews thought of Yahweh's uniqueness as consisting primarily in his being the *sole* creator and *sole* ruler over the cosmos.<sup>20</sup> These

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<sup>20</sup> Bauckham 2008, 9.

are as obviously unsharable as *being the only person in this room*.

Perhaps the most promising route is to let G in D3 be *divinity*. Any divine being must have *that*, and *perhaps* it is sharable – let’s stipulate that it doesn’t entail being Yahweh, or existing *a se* – and if a divine being *shares* it, then of course there must be *another* divine being. But is “divinity” here a universal property or a particular property? If the former, it would be by definition sharable. But it seems to leave one with a picture of multiple gods. The idea that the members of the Trinity share a merely generic unity has traditionally been condemned as polytheistic. Thus, the tradition has required – perhaps less clearly in patristic writings, but fairly clearly by the Fourth Lateran council of 1215, which I read as asserting that the divine nature is a particular, moreover one which the Trinity, and which each Person of it, in some sense “is”.<sup>21</sup>

Is it possible that a *particular* property be shared – that is, had by more than one bearer? It isn’t clear to me, or to many philosophers, that it is. Some philosophers don’t believe in properties. Others believe in universal properties which may be present in various individual entities, but not particular properties. Some believe in both, and take one or the other to be more basic or more fundamental. Others believe only in tropes – individual properties which are more fundamental than the substances/entities which were traditionally thought to bear or possess or support them.<sup>22</sup> Might these be shared by or be components of two things? I don’t know. It is clear, however, that catholic theologians from the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century on assumed that the Father could share his divine nature, either eternally or in time, just prior to creation. And certain New Testament passages can be taken to involve this idea.<sup>23</sup> One may take this tradition as a reason to believe that *whatever* the divine nature is, it is some sort of sharable particular, and is that in virtue of which its bearer is a god. This, in the absence of

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21 Tanner 1990, pp. 231-232.

22 This is perhaps the most famous recent version of trope theory. See Bacon, John, “Tropes”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/tropes/>.

23 Hebrews 1:3, Philippians 2:6.



a worked out metaphysics of properties and natures on which there are shareable, individual nature-properties, is a reason to believe D3. Granting D3, the argument would hinge on D1.<sup>24</sup> To have a cogent argument, we must a reason to think it true.

I'm not aware of any such reason. In general, selves have rights to hold back goods they enjoy, such as knowledge, plans, desires, and so on. Personal relationships are a dance in which the parties reveal aspects of themselves, then respond to the other's revelations, and proceed to reveal new aspects. Though I am your friend, I'm not obligated to share every thought with you, every feeling, idea, memory, perception, experience, etc. Yet many of those are goods I possess and can share. Now switch from human beings to a divine being - must a divine being share all he can? It's hard to see why he'd have any such obligation. But if it would not be wrong for him to hold something back, might he for some other reason be compelled to share *every* good he has? I can't think of any such reason.

I can think of a reason to think D1 is false, albeit a weak and defeasible one. A divinity is a self. And human selves navigate their personal relationships precisely by freely controlling how much they share. But humans are made in the image and likeness of the one divine being, their creator. Therefore, it is likely that even a divine self freely controls how much of its goods it shares. I conclude that D1-D5 is not a cogent argument, not an argument we know to be sound.

## 5. Relational Persons

But perhaps there's a more direct route to the impossibility of a single divine or perfect self. Any such being must *ipso facto* be a self. And a number of theologians have argued that any self, divine or not, is *essentially* in personal relationship with other selves. If this is so, then in possible worlds lingo, there's no possible world featuring exactly one self. And it would follow that there's no possible world with

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<sup>24</sup> This is probably too generous an admission, as it assumes that divinity doesn't entail aseity, and that the Christian tradition, properly understood, teaches that the Son exists and is divine because of the eternal, generative action of the Father. I'm inclined to deny both of these, on philosophical and biblical grounds, respectively. (Tuggy forthcoming, section 3)

just one divine self, or perfect self.

There are at least three seductive features of this strategy. First, it promises to avoid the whole confident method of Anselmian perfect being theology, which one may worry places too much trust in our intuitions about greatness or perfection.<sup>25</sup> Second, it avoids the metaphysical morass of property theories, as well as competing ways to think of the property *divinity*. Third, it allures with the idea that trinitarian theology supplies insights into understanding *all* selves, and so all human selves. Perhaps there are practical (marital, social, political) benefits to be had here, and theoretical ones outside of theology (social sciences).

We have, then, a simple argument for the conclusion that if there's a divine self, there must be at least one other self. This would stick it to the "mere monotheists". The premise is that necessarily, every self is essentially in relationship with at least one other self. This premise purports to be a crucial insight into what it is to be a self. What a self essentially is, it necessarily is. What it necessarily is, is how it must be so long as it exists, on pain of contradiction. To have a reason to believe our thesis, then, we need to display the contradiction involved in believing in a relationship-free self.

So far as I can tell, no one has done this, anywhere in the vast theological literature. There is some confident, abstract talk of the "essentially relationally of the self", and so on, as if this were something anyone had a reason to believe.<sup>26</sup> And there's a more general thesis of "being as communion", which I gather would imply the premise in question, which is sometimes touted, again, as if it were a discovery.<sup>27</sup> I'm not quite sure what this thesis is, but *if* it is the claim that to exist just is, or entails being in a personal relationship, it is plainly false. Arguably, electrons, pickles, planets, and

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<sup>25</sup> While such worries are legitimate, one should beware of too quickly dismissing this sort of reasoning as over-confident "rationalism". For a careful discussion of the historical roots and legitimacy of perfect being reasoning in Christian theology, see Leftow 2010.

<sup>26</sup> For a helpful survey of this unclear theological genre, with a diagnosis of it as overeager to make theology relevant, see Kilby 2000.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the dark assertions of John Zizioulas, discussed in McCall 2010, 189-192. Zizioulas seems to be more interested in deducing claims such as that "there is no true being without communion" from a "social" Trinity doctrine, rather than arguing for it based on an alleged insight into personhood or being.

mountains exist, and not only are they not friends with anyone, they aren't even the kinds of things which can conceivably be "in communion". We all *know* there are things like this. If the claim is instead that necessarily, all things exist in some relation or other to at least one other thing, this is not obviously true, since as we've noted (section 3 above), it seems possible that there is just one thing, one god. If there's a necessary being (and as a Christian theist, I assume there is) then it is a trivial truth that necessarily, *anything else* there is (whether necessary or contingent) bears some relation to it. But this is consistent with it being true that this necessary being could exist alone.

Not only is our thesis, to my knowledge, unargued for, there's reason to think it false. Imagine a possible unwanted pregnancy. When the time comes to deliver, the couple rows to a deserted desert island, when the woman delivers a healthy baby. Refusing to so much as look at it, they cut its cord, leave it on the beach, and escape in their boat. Somehow – say, by sheer luck, by miracle, by the benevolent services of a wolf-pack or some friendly apes – the infant grows to adulthood. He may be a very disabled adult, having grown up in a *very* unnatural environment. But he'll be a self – a thing with will and mind, *capable* of entering into personal relationships, at least with some considerable coaching and practice, or perhaps a miracle of psychological healing. Let's add that he's a life-long atheist, and not the kind who curses God, but rather the kind who never thinks about God. Thus, he is a self, and he has never, even for a moment, been in a personal relationship with any other self. This story appears to be contradiction-free. If it is, then it is false that necessarily, any self is in relationship with at least one other.

The same point can be made with a simpler, more chilling story. Some have speculated that those who are sent to Hell are neither literally burned nor actively tormented, but are simply cast into permanent, utter isolation. Imagine this happening to you; you are judged for your deeds, and then find your self in an empty, dark place. You call out, "Hello? Is anyone there?" Days, weeks, months pass, and your sanity hangs by a thread, for you are deprived of any degree of attention, as far as you can tell,

from anyone. (If God is aware of you, you have no hint of this – he has seemingly abandoned you.) You are devoid of *any* sort of friendship or communion. But, you are as much a self as you ever were – not a thriving one, to be sure, but a self nonetheless. Anyone who wants to argue for the needed premise must derive at least one contradiction from any story like these – that is the only way one can prove an alleged necessary truth.

But does it need proving? Why not claim it to be self-evident, obviously true, and thus not in need of any supporting argument? This is wrong-headed; that we can tell the above stories with no evident contradiction shows the claim *not* to be self-evident. To the contrary, as we've seen, there is good reason to think it false.

But is not the thesis – or the broader “being as communion” claim something revealed? If so, then perhaps we need only point this out – there's our reason to believe it: a being who cannot lie has said so. I take it there's no hope of finding these in or deducing them from the Bible. It won't do to urge that the Bible tells us that “God is love”, or even that it reveals, over all, God to be a loving community (collective, communion, etc.) of three divine selves. For even if this is so, how would that imply either being as communion or the necessary relationality of *all* selves? Why could not one of these omnipotent beings, or all of them together, create an non-relational yet existing being, such as a pebble? And why couldn't they create, at least for one moment, an isolated, relationship-free self? It seems they could do both, being omnipotent. Thus it *seems* that both are possible.

## 6. Conclusion

These philosophical social trinitarians are trying to show that other conceptions of God, of the absolutely perfect being, turn out to be contradictory, whereas what they contentiously urge as *the* Christian view of God is coherent. Not only have they failed to support their case, but the very sort of reasoning they use supports the opposite conclusion. The greatest sort of being we can conceive of is a

super-duper self, a being with perfect goodness (including the character trait of being perfectly loving), the greatest kind of power, and unlimited knowledge. Other great-making features include existing independently of any outside cause, and being happy (well-off, fulfilled) independently of the existence or condition of anything else. Even friends of social theories spell out their idea of an absolutely perfect being like this: “a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with unlimited knowledge and power who is the necessarily existent, ontologically independent creative source of all else.”<sup>28</sup>

Again, since the “one God” of social trinitarians is normally not a self (being either a group of selves, or a complex substance with the divine selves as parts and which is not a self) it is not clear that a social theory is compatible with perfect-being theology. Such trinitarians would be best advised to argue from other grounds – from scripture and tradition, as difficult as this is.<sup>29</sup> If it should be that one or both of these imply that there can’t be a single divine self, then we would have a genuine faith-reason conflict, for as we’ve seen, reflection independent of divine revelation suggests that there can be a lone, perfect self. It *may* be reasonable to side with faith, with tradition here, against independent reason; it depends on the state of the evidence.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Morris 1991, 40. While Morris concedes that there are epistemic difficulties perfect being theology, and argues that it requires “revelational control”, in the end he asserts that it captures “the most majestic conception of God imaginable.” (43)

29 On this see Tuggy 2003, Tuggy 2004, and Tuggy (forthcoming).

30 On the issue of our having evidence for seemingly contradictory beliefs, see Tuggy 2010. My thanks to my colleagues Andrew Cullison, Neil Feit, and Stephen Kershner for their feedback on an early draft, and to Stephen Davis, Joseph Jedwab, J.T. Paasch, and Scott Williams for helpful online and email discussions.

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