Truthmaker Trinitarianism

RYAN BYERLY
University of Sheffield
t.r.byerly@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper employs recent developments in the theory of truthmakers to offer a novel solution to the most discussed philosophical challenge presented by the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. According to the view developed, the Father, Son, and Spirit each serve as the only substantial constituent of equally minimal truthmakers for claims about God. Because they do, there is a clear and robust sense in which each is a substance that "is" God as much as anything is, while the three remain distinct from each other. The view is shown to hold certain *prima facie* advantages over rival extant approaches.

Keywords: Trinity, truthmaker, overdetermination, Greek Trinitarianism, constitution

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity presents a significant philosophical challenge. In this paper, I develop a novel response to this challenge that employs recent developments in the theory of truthmakers. Section one explains what the philosophical challenge of the Trinity is and briefly highlights problems plausibly facing representative extant approaches to answering it. Section two develops my novel approach and shows why it does not suffer from these same problems. Section three then engages with some initially worrisome objections to my proposal and shows that there are responses to these objections that are promising enough to warrant further future consideration of it.

1. The Philosophical Challenge of the Trinity

Closely following Michael Rea (2009), we can characterize the philosophical challenge[1] of the Trinity as arising from the following set of three claims about the

---

[1] There are other ways to state the philosophical challenge of the Trinity (e.g., Leftow 2004), as well as alternative approaches to categorizing answers to it (e.g., Tuggy 2016). Indeed, one might sensibly think that the Trinity presents more than one distinctive philosophical problem. The one I

Triune God which are each plausibly taught in the Christian Scriptures and affirmed by the Christian Church historically[2]:

(1) There is exactly one God.
(2) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical to one another.
(3) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are consubstantial.

Claim (1) here expresses the Christian commitment to monotheism as contrasted with polytheism. Claim (2) expresses the distinctness among the divine Persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—within the Trinity. And, claim (3) expresses the relation between the Father, Son, and Spirit that allows it to be the case that each in some clear and robust sense "is God" just as much as each of the others, as proclaimed in the Athanasian Creed.[3] The term "consubstantial" in (3) is an English translation of the Greek *homoousios* that figured prominently in debates concerning the Trinity in the early Church.

The trouble with (1)–(3) is that it is difficult to see how all three could be true. The specific site of the difficulty is located at claim (3) and concerns exactly what it is for the Father, Son, and Spirit to be "consubstantial." To see the difficulty involved in explaining what it is for the divine Persons to be consubstantial, notice first that it cannot be for them to be identical to one another, as claim (2) expressly forbids this. It is at least initially problematic, moreover, to claim that it is for them to be *of the same kind*. For, suppose that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same kind. What kind would this be? Well, in order to ensure that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God," as an adequate account of consubstantiality is supposed to, it would seem that the kind would have to be the kind *God*. But, now, since, by (2), the Father, Son, and Spirit are not identical, it seems we must conclude that (1) is false: there is more than one member of the kind *God*.

---

address is the one that has received the most extensive recent philosophical treatment. Rea helpfully distinguishes this philosophical problem from the related interpretive problem of understanding how the key terms in which the doctrine of the Trinity is formulated were first understood, and how the understanding of these terms has evolved historically. Like Rae, I will focus my efforts on the philosophical problem rather than the interpretive problem, aiming to answer the question "how could three distinct persons . . . be consubstantial in a way that would make them countable as *one God*?" (2009: 689).

[2] See (Rae 2009) for an explanation of how the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, which form the primary creedal basis for the doctrine of the Trinity, are seen as affirming these theses and thereby generating the philosophical problem of the Trinity.

[3] The Creed reads, "Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God" (Christian Reformed Church 1988, 9).

With this in mind, I can now explain the philosophical challenge of the Trinity. The philosophical challenge of the Trinity is to offer an account of what it is for the Father, Son, and Spirit to be "consubstantial," which neither implies that the Father, Son, and Spirit are identical (in violation of (2)) nor implies that there is more than one God (in violation of (1)), but which does permit there to be a clear and robust sense in which each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" just as much as the others.

It is common today to lump proposed answers to the philosophical challenge of the Trinity under three major headings—Latin Trinitarianism, Greek Trinitarianism, and Constitution Trinitarianism.[4] In the remainder of this section, I briefly discuss the general features of accounts of these three kinds, offering an illustrative example of each, and I highlight problems plausibly faced by accounts of each kind. In the next section, I argue that my novel approach avoids these problems.

Begin with Latin Trinitarianism. Latin approaches propose that, at least in part, what it is in virtue of which the Father, Son, and Spirit are "consubstantial" is that the existence of each depends on numerically the same substance—namely, God. The dependence here is some kind of metaphysical dependence, comparable to the sort of dependence according to which seated Socrates depends upon Socrates.[5]

As an illustrative example of Latin Trinitarianism, consider the approach of Brian Leftow (2004, 2007).[6] Leftow compares the Trinity to a time–traveler who twice travels back in time to a time at which she exists, but each time she travels to a different location. Moreover, each of the distinct manifestations of the traveler, which Leftow calls "event–based persons," cooperate with one another in shared activity. Here it is plausible that (1.1) there is exactly one time–traveler who manifests herself in three event–based persons, (1.2) the three event–based persons are non–identical, and (1.3) the dependence of the event–based persons upon the one time–traveler delivers a clear and robust sense in which each "is the time–traveler." Accordingly, this should increase our confidence that, if the Father, Son,

---

[4] The classification derives in part from Théodore de Régnon (see Barnes 1995), and it has been employed by *inter alia* (Leftow 1999), (Hasker 2010), (Tuggy 2003), and (Rea 2009). For resistance to this classificatory scheme, see (Ayres 2004) and (Cross 2002).

[5] Echoing this description, Dale Tuggy writes that Latin Trinitarianism "explain[s] that these three divine 'persons' are really ways the one divine self is, that is say, modes of the one god" (Tuggy 2016). The description is clearly apt of Leftow's model discussed in the next paragraph, of which he says, "the triune Persons are event-based persons founded on a generating substance, God" (2007: 373).

[6] For other recent examples, see (Morris 1989), (Merricks 2006), and the essays on Latin Trinitarianism in (McCall and Rea 2009).

and Spirit each metaphysically depend on God in an analogous way, then (1)–(3) can be coherently maintained.

One significant concern for Latin Trinitarianism is that it threatens to succumb to modalism—a heresy identified in the early Church according to which the divine Persons are not substances in their own right, but are merely modes of God (cf. Rea 2009: 407).[7] If the Father, Son, and Spirit are consubstantial in the way proposed, then, one worries that they are not substances but merely modes—ways the one substance, God, is. For example, applied to Leftow's analogy, the time–traveler is the only substance in the analogy; the distinct manifestations of this time–traveler are only ways the time–traveler is—located here, there and there. An apparent implication of this that many practicing Christians would find unacceptable is that the Father, Son, and Spirit have their existence, and hence their divinity, derivatively. They are not each as fully God as any substance can be.

Move to Greek Trinitarianism, which tends by contrast to make the divine Persons out to be substances in their own right. Greek approaches are characterized by proposing that, at least in part, what it is in virtue of which the Father, Son, and Spirit are "consubstantial" is that they are parts of a whole, where each part is of the same metaphysical kind. Moreover, the Father, Son, and Spirit are related to one another as parts in such a way as to preserve a significant unity in the whole they together compose—namely, God.

As an illustration of Greek Trinitarianism, consider Craig's and Moreland's (2003) comparison of the Trinity to the three–headed dog, Cerberus, of Greek mythology.[8] They propose that the three heads, or rather, the three souls embodied in these heads, are three non–identical centers of consciousness which are part of the one dog, Cerberus. Moreover, each of the three centers of consciousness is of the same metaphysical kind. Here it is plausible that (2.1) there is exactly one dog, (2.2) the one dog has three non–identical parts, and (2.3) because of the relation between these parts and the one dog, each of them "is canine." Accordingly, this should increase our confidence that, if the Father, Son, and Spirit are parts of the whole God in an analogous way, then (1)–(3) can be coherently maintained.

---

[7] Leftow (2007), in response to this kind of objection, denies that the view that the divine Persons are modes implies modalism. Modalism, of the sort condemned in the early centuries of the Church, requires not only that the divine Persons are modes, but that they are sequential, non-intrinsic, non-essential modes of God (cf. further McGrath 2007). The problem of metaphysical dependence that I highlight in the text arises even if the divine Persons are non-sequential, intrinsic, essential modes of God, however. See also the arguments against Leftow's view in (Hasker 2012) and (Tuggy 2016).

[8] For additional examples, see (Plantinga 1989), (Swinburne 1994), the essays on social trinitarianism in (McCall and Rea 2009), and (Hasker 2013).

A significant concern with Greek Trinitarianism is that it threatens to imply either that polytheism is true or that the sense in which each of the divine Persons "is God" is objectionably weak.[9] To see the problem, focus on the fact that on these approaches, the divine persons are said to be consubstantial, in part, because they are each members of the same metaphysical kind. An appropriate question to ask is: what metaphysical kind is this? Is it a kind that includes the kind *God*? Either way the advocate of the Greek approach answers there seems to be a problem. If she answers affirmatively, then it seems polytheism—specifically, tetratheism— follows. For, the Father, Son, and Spirit are non–identical members of the kind, *God*, and so is the whole of which they are parts.[10] If she answers negatively, then it is difficult to see how she can maintain that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God"—something that their consubstantiality was supposed to ensure. Advocates of Greek approaches tend to reply (as, e.g., in Craig and Moreland 2003) by emphasizing that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" in a sense that is different from the sense in which the being they together compose "is God," just as the parts of a dog are "canine" in a sense that differs, and is weaker, than the sense in which the entire dog is "canine." But, one worries that this makes the sense in which each of the divine Persons "is God" a rather weak sense. Whereas on Latin Trinitarianism, the Persons derive their *existence* from a more fundamental substance, on this version of Greek Trinitarianism, the Persons derive their *divinity* from a substance that is more fundamentally divine than they are.

A final approach to answering the challenge of the Trinity has been called "Constitution Trinitarianism."[11] This approach, defended recently by Michael Rea (2009), proposes that the Father, Son, and Spirit are hylomorphic compounds. Whereas more mundane, Aristotelian hylomorphic compounds have two constituents—undifferentiated matter and a form that gives organization and direction to this matter—the divine Persons each have unique personal forms that organize and give direction to immaterial divine nature. The immaterial divine nature plays the role for the divine Persons that is played by matter in more

---

[9] This objection is pressed against the approach of Craig and Moreland in (Howard-Snyder 2003). For a reply, see (Craig 2006).

[10] Whether tetratheism or tritheism looms depends upon what is said about the whole of which the divine Persons are parts. Tuggy (2013), like Rea (2009), argues that Craig and Moreland are committed to the view that this whole is a fourth divine substance.

[11] For reasons to be made clear in the next paragraph, Constitution Trinitarianism may be seen as a member of the family of answers to the philosophical problem of the Trinity that employ the notion of relative sameness. Other versions of this approach include (Martinich 1978), (Cain 1989), and (van Inwagen 1995, 2003). See also the essays devoted to such approaches in (McCall and Rea 2009), and (Hasker 2013, ch.28).

mundane Aristotelian hylomorphic compounds. What makes the Father, Son, and Spirit "consubstantial," on this view, is that numerically the same immaterial divine nature plays the role of matter for each of the compounds. Because they share this immaterial constituent in their hylomorphic compounds, we properly count them as exactly one God.

The favored analogy employed by advocates of Constitution Trinitarianism compares the Trinity to a statue which is also being used as a pillar in a building. Here the statue and the pillar are thought of as mundane Aristotelian hylomorphic compounds of matter and form, with the statue having a statue form and the pillar having a pillar form. The statue and pillar are consubstantial because they each have the very same matter playing the role of matter in their respective hylomorphic compounds. Because of their consubstantiality, we count them as exactly one material object. Thus, it is supposed to be plausible that (3.1) the pillar and the statue count as exactly one material object, (3.2) the pillar and the statue are non–identical, and (3.3) there is a clear and robust sense in which each of the pillar and the statue "is the material object." It's not that the pillar and the statue are unqualifiedly identical to numerically the same material object. Rather, the pillar and the statue are *relatively* identical to it—they are *the same material object* as it. Accordingly, this should increase our confidence that, if the Father, Son, and Spirit are each hylomorphic compounds in which the divine nature plays the role played by matter in mundane Aristotelian hylomorphic compounds, then (1)–(3) can be coherently maintained.

The worry facing Constitution Trinitarianism that I will focus on concerns modalism. Although Constitution Trinitarians borrow some of their metaphysics from Aristotle, they are quick to acknowledge that Aristotle himself would not have bought in to their proposal, because Aristotle would not have granted that statues and pillars are substances (Rea 2009: 713). Contemporary philosophers may find themselves attracted to Aristotle's side here, thinking that statues and pillars are modes of their underlying particles rather than substances in their own right. One motivation for this is that truths about statues and pillars supervene on truths about their underlying particles. There cannot be any difference across possible worlds in truths about statues and pillars without a difference in truths about their underlying particles. This may lead some to think statues and pillars aren't anything "over and above" their underlying particles in any significant metaphysical sense, but that instead statue and pillar talk is just a convenient way to refer to arrangements of particles.[12]

---

[12] See section "Supervenience and Ontological Innocence" in (McLaughlin and Bennett 2011).
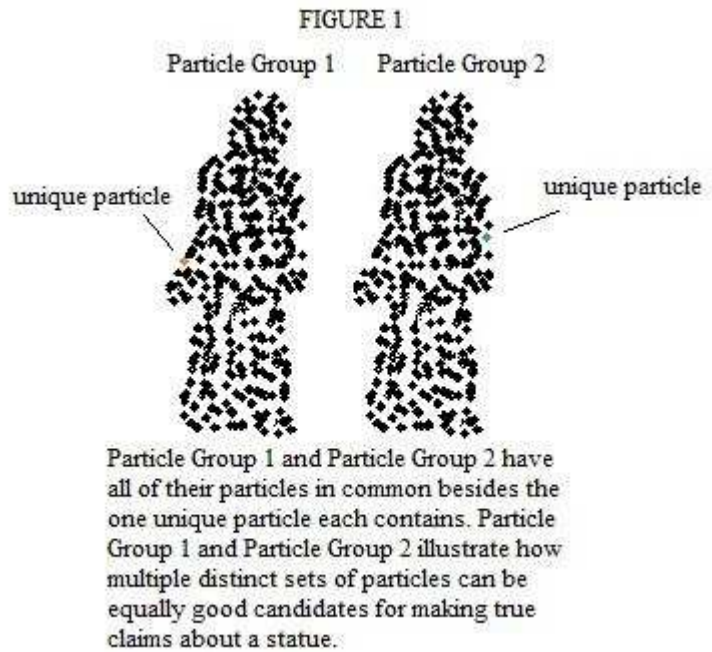
The foregoing observations about the questionable metaphysical status of statues and pillars are important because they raise the worry that there might not in fact be any mundane cases where more than one *substance* has the same entity playing the role for it played by matter in mundane Aristotelian hylomorphic compounds. If there aren't any such cases, this will decrease our confidence that it is coherent to maintain that the Father, Son, and Spirit are substances that share the same element as the constituent playing the role for them played by matter in mundane Aristotelian hylomorphic compounds. The Father, Son, and Spirit may then end up being viewed just like a more thoroughgoing Aristotelian would view the statue and the pillar. They are modes of the divine nature, and not substances in their own right.

I will offer an alternative approach to defending the coherence of (1)–(3) in the next section, which I call Truthmaker Trinitarianism, and argue that it does not succumb to the prima facie difficulties facing alternative accounts highlighted in this section. In contrast to Constitution and Latin Trinitarianisms, even ontologically parsimonious metaphysicians like Aristotle will grant that on Truthmaker Trinitarianism the Father, Son, and Spirit are substances. In contrast to Latin Trinitarianism and certain versions of Greek Trinitarianism, Truthmaker Trinitarianism will imply that each of the divine Persons equally "is God" as fully as any substance can be. And, in contrast to other versions of Greek Trinitarianism, Truthmaker Trinitarianism will not threaten to imply that there are three if not four Gods.

2. Truthmaker Trinitarianism

Before offering a formal account of Truthmaker Trinitarianism, I begin with an analogy—an analogy that appeals to a version of the Aristotelian–inspired view of statues alluded to above. On the view I have in mind, which has gained significant currency of late (e.g., Cameron 2010, Rettler 2016), there can be truths about Fs even if these truths aren't made true by Fs themselves, but by something else. For example, the claim "there are statues" may be made true not by statues themselves but by fundamental particles standing in statue–wise arrangements. On such a view, statues may be treated as not making any addition to being over and above more fundamental particles and their relations. We might properly say that there aren't *really* any statues, or that statues don't show up on the correct ontological inventory of the world. Nonetheless, our everyday talk of statues is perfectly true. These truths are made true not by statues themselves, which have no robust ontological status, but instead by certain particles and relations between them.

Suppose we adopt such a view, and begin to think about what would make claims about a certain statue of Athena true. Notably, in most cases, there will not be any one statue–wise arrangement of particles that is the uniquely best candidate for making such claims true. Rather, there will be multiple arrangements of particles that are equally good candidates for making this claim true (see Figure 1).[13] Most claims about Athena, such as the claim that she is six feet tall, are simply not fine–grained enough to discriminate between whether it is *this* arrangement of particles or *that* nearly identical one that makes them true. Rather, multiple distinct arrangements

FIGURE 1

Particle Group 1   Particle Group 2

unique particle   unique particle

Particle Group 1 and Particle Group 2 have all of their particles in common besides the one unique particle each contains. Particle Group 1 and Particle Group 2 illustrate how multiple distinct sets of particles can be equally good candidates for making true claims about a statue.

that differ only with respect to a small percentage of their constituent particles each make this true; they overdetermine its truth.[14] Yet, despite the fact that multiple distinct arrangements of particles make the same claims about Athena true, it would be a mistake to conclude that there is more than one Athena.

So we have it on the present analogy, which has been developed by appealing to an increasingly popular metaphysical view about truthmakers, that the following is the case. When it comes to truths about a particular statue of Athena, it could be the case that there are distinct arrangements of particles that are equally good candidates for making these truths true, that it is ultimately these particles and their relations rather than the statue that are afforded robust ontological status, and that it is incorrect to conclude that there is more than one statue of Athena.

---

[13] One may worry that, if truthmakers must necessitate the truth of those claims they make true, then it is not simply the particles arranged as they are that make the relevant truths true. Additional conditions in the surrounding environment must be certain ways as well, for example. But, some truthmaker theorists (e.g., Briggs 2012) have denied this necessitation principle, and we may also be able to get around this concern by maintaining that if the surrounding environment were to change, the precise relations between the relevant particles would as well. It is there being related in *exactly* the way they are that makes the relevant truths true.

[14] For a recent defence of the possibility of there being multiple truthmakers—indeed, multiple equally minimal truthmakers (more on this below)—for a truth, see (O'Connaill and Tahko 2016).

Truthmaker Trinitarianism proposes that a parallel relationship holds between God and the Persons of the Trinity. All claims about God are ultimately made true only by states of affairs involving the substances that are the Father, the Son, or the Spirit. God is not an additional substance over and above the Father, Son, and Spirit metaphysically speaking, even though there are truths about God. In many cases, truths about God are overdetermined by the Father, Son, and Spirit in much the way that truths about Athena are overdetermined by distinct arrangements of particles. Yet, despite the fact that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit is in this way involved in distinct states of affairs that serve as truthmakers for claims about God, it does not follow that there is more than one God, any more than it follows from the role of distinct arrangements of particles in making true claims about Athena that there is more than one Athena.

We can define Truthmaker Trinitarianism more precisely by employing the notion of minimal truthmakers. Loosely following David Armstrong (2004), I will treat truthmakers as states of affairs. These states of affairs have as their constituents either a single substance having a monadic property or multiple substances standing in a relation. Truthmakers can be either full or partial. Whereas each emerald's being green is a partial truthmaker for the claim "all emeralds are green," this claim is only fully made true by all of the emeralds being similarly green to one another. Minimal truthmakers are then defined as the smallest portion of reality required for fully making some proposition true. More precisely, a minimal truthmaker for a proposition p is a state of affairs S which is a full truthmaker for p and which is such that no proper constituent of S is a full truthmaker for p (cf. O'Connaill and Tahko 2016).

With this background in mind, Truthmaker Trinitarianism proposes the following account of the consubstantiality of the Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father, Son, and Spirit are consubstantial in that each is one of the only three substances that serve as substantial constituents of any minimal truthmaker for any truth that is exclusively about the one and only member of the kind, God. A truth is exclusively about the one and only member of the kind, God, when it is about the one and only member of the kind, God, and is not about any substance that is not God.

In more detail, Truthmaker Trinitarianism's account of consubstantiality teaches the following. Take the class of all truths that are exclusively about God and that have a minimal truthmaker. Each such truth is either made true by one or more minimal truthmaker containing only one substantial constituent having a monadic property, or it is made true by one or more minimal truthmaker containing multiple substantial constituents standing in a relation. Call truths of

the former sort monadic truths and truths of the latter sort relational truths. The consubstantiality of the Father, Son, and Spirit teaches that for any monadic truth about the one and only member of the kind, God, that truth is made true by a minimal truthmaker containing the Father as its substantial constituent, a minimal truthmaker containing the Son as its substantial constituent, and/or a minimal truthmaker containing the Spirit as its substantial constituent. In cases of relational truths about the one and only member of the kind, God, these are made true either by a minimal truthmaker containing the Father and Son as its substantial constituents, a minimal truthmaker containing the Son and Spirit as its substantial constituents, and/or a minimal truthmaker containing the Father and Spirit as its substantial constituents, or else it is made true by a minimal truthmaker containing the Father, Son, and Spirit as its substantial constituents. Notably, this account of consubstantiality allows that there may be cases where the Father, Son, and Spirit are each the only members of equally minimal truthmakers for a monadic truth about the one and only member of the kind, God; and, it allows for cases where the Father and Son, Son and Spirit, and Father and Spirit are the only substantial constituents of equally minimal truthmakers for a relational truth about the one and only member of the kind, God. It allows, that is, for a kind of truthmaker overdetermination paralleling what we found above in the case of Athena.

Let me illustrate how the foregoing account of the consubstantiality of the Father, Son, and Spirit works with some simple examples. Take, first, the monadic truth, "God is omniscient." This claim affirms that the one and only member of the kind, God, has a certain epistemic property—omniscience. It is exclusively about God because it is about the one and only member of the kind, God, and is not about any substance that is not God. If it has a minimal truthmaker, the Truthmaker Trinitarian's account of consubstantiality implies that it will be made true by a minimal truthmaker containing the Father as its substantial constituent, a minimal truthmaker containing the Son as its substantial constituent, and/or a minimal truthmaker containing the Spirit as its substantial constituent. I would propose that in this particular case and many other similar cases, the claim is made true by multiple, equally minimal truthmakers. The claim is made true by the state of affairs of the Father's being omniscient, the state of affairs of the Son's being omniscient, and the state of affairs of the Spirit's being omniscient.[15]

---

[15] Craig and Moreland say something similar: "[W]hen we ascribe omniscience and omnipotence to God, we are not making the Trinity a fourth person or agent; rather, God has these properties because the persons do. Divine attributes like omniscience, omnipotence and goodness are grounded in the persons' possessing these properties" (2003: 591). Indeed, more broadly, we might notice that there is a fair amount of overlap between Truthmaker Trinitarianism and Greek

There may be other cases where a monadic truth about God is made true by only one minimal truthmaker which contains either the Father, Son, or Spirit as its only substantial constituent. Perhaps, for example, "God became man" is made true by only one minimal truthmaker—one that contains the Son as its only substantial constituent. This truth is perhaps still exclusively about God since it is about the one and only member of the kind, God, and is not about any substance that is not God, since the God–man is God. I don't think there will be many such cases, though there may be some.[16]

Plausibly, there are likewise relational truths about God which are made true by multiple equally minimal truthmakers as well as relational truths about God made true by one uniquely minimal truthmaker. Perhaps in the former category is "God is relational" or "God is love." In the latter category may be "God sent his Son," which is made true by only one minimal truthmaker that contains only the Father and Son as its substantial constituents.[17] "God is triune" likewise may be made true by only one minimal truthmaker containing all three of the Father, Son, and Spirit as its substantial constituents.

Trinitarianism, insofar as each takes the three Persons of the godhead as given and seeks to explain the divine unity (cf. Rea 2009). On this basis, one might think of Truthmaker Trinitarianism as a heretofore insufficiently appreciated form of Greek Trinitarianism. It should be clear, nonetheless, that Truthmaker Trinitarianism does not require the Persons to stand in a part-to-whole relation to God, as the Greek models discussed earlier in the text do. Among extant Greek models, the approach here is perhaps most similar to Swinburne's (1994), insofar as the unity of the Persons, which on Swinburne's model is analogous to a ruling family, is not the sort of thing one would be tempted to award robust ontological status.

[16] Perhaps more precisely we should say that in cases where a truth about God has a single uniquely minimal truthmaker involving only the Father, Son, or Spirit, that the claim in question is not true of God *simpliciter*, but rather of God *qua* the relevant Person. So, for example, it isn't true that God became man *simpliciter*, but rather that God *qua* Son became man. Such a move would forestall the concern that God must both have become man and not become man, since the Son became man but the Father did not.

[17] In note 1, I observed that there is more than one philosophical challenge raised by the Trinity. A second challenge concerns how the Persons of the Trinity can be related in such a way that each is fully God despite being related to one another in such a way that claims regarding the Son's *generation* and the Spirit's *procession* can be true. While this problem isn't my focus here, it would seem that approaches others have taken to this problem are not unavailable on the model proposed here. For example, we might imagine that in the statue analogy there is some kind of metaphysical dependence of one set of truth-making particles on another despite the sets serving similar truth-making functions for claims about Athena, thereby allowing that there is analogously some kind of metaphysical dependence of some Persons of the Trinity on the others, despite their serving similar truth-making functions for claims about God. Compare here (Makin forthcoming) on the Son's essential dependence on the Father.

With this explanation of Truthmaker Trinitarianism in hand, I now conclude this section by arguing, first, that Truthmaker Trinitarianism can maintain (1)–(3), and, second, that it can do so without succumbing to the difficulties facing rival Trinitarianisms discussed in the previous section.

First, notice that Truthmaker Trinitarianism is perfectly consistent with there being only one member of the kind, God. Indeed, the account is specifically designed to explain the role of the Father, Son, and Spirit in making true claims about the one and only member of the kind, God. Since maintaining that there is only one member of the kind, God, is clearly a way to maintain that there is exactly one God, the account is clearly consistent with claim (1). Second, the account affirms that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct substances, thereby affirming claim (2). It clearly states that they are each one of the only *three* distinct substances that serve as the substantial constituents of truthmakers for claims about God. Finally, the account is able to maintain that, by virtue of their consubstantiality, each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" in a robust sense. To see this, return to the case of the statue and the particles and imagine that someone has just been told, as above, that the statue is not identical to any substance over and above the particles, but that there are still truths about the statue. Such a person may wonder, "Well, what *is* the statue, then?" I propose that as good an answer to this question as any is that, to the extent that anything "is the statue," it is the member particles of each of the distinct sets of particles whose members serve as the only substantial constituents of a minimal truthmaker for a claim about the statue. One wouldn't want to privilege the member particles of any *one* of these sets over the members of any other, claiming that only the member particles of *one* of these sets "are the statue." Yet, it would also be unattractive to maintain that there is no sense at all in which anything "is the statue." The statue, in a robust sense, is just *these* particles, and *those* particles, and *those* particles that serve as the substantial constituents of minimal truthmakers for claims about it. Similarly, I propose that there is a clear and robust sense in which each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God." It would be a mistake to privilege one of the divine Persons over the others, proclaiming that only this Person "is God." And it would be a mistake to say that nothing in any sense "is God." Of course, the sense in which the particles "are the statue" and the sense in which each of the Father, Son and Spirit "is God" is a sense other than that of numerical identity. It is rather a sense that has to do with the role served by the particles, as well as the Father, Son, and Spirit, in minimal truthmakers. The members of distinct sets of particles "are the statue" because they serve as the only substantial constituents of minimal truthmakers for claims about the statue. Likewise, each of the Father, Son, and

Spirit "is God" because each serves as the only substantial constituent of minimal truthmakers for claims about God. Notably, the idea that in at least some cases the substantial constituent of a minimal truthmaker for a claim about some X in some sense "is X" has philosophical precedent. In fact, Alexander Pruss (2008) employs this idea in his defense of the doctrine of divine simplicity, proposing that "God is God's justice," since God is the only substantial constituent in any minimal truthmaker for any truth solely about God's justice. I am simply broadening this idea here to cases where we have truthmaker overdetermination. Rather than propose that there is nothing that in any sense "is X" in such cases, I propose that each of these substances equally "is X." In this way, Truthmaker Trinitarianism yields a clear and robust sense in which each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God," and so (3) is maintained.

Moreover, Truthmaker Trinitarianism maintains (1)–(3) in a way that does not threaten to imply the errors of polytheism or modalism in the way that the accounts surveyed in the previous section threaten to. Notice, first, that Truthmaker Trinitarianism requires by definition that the Father, Son, and Spirit are substances, thereby avoiding the concern of modalism that threatens Latin and Constitution approaches. Moreover, the specific role the view assigns to the Father, Son, and Spirit is a role that even the most ontologically parsimonious metaphysicians will grant can and perhaps must be played by substances. Second, as discussed previously, the only claims about a member of the kind, God, made true by states of affairs involving the Father, Son, or Spirit are claims about *the only* member of the kind, God. Thus, the view has it that there is exactly one God. This feature of the account avoids the problem of polytheism that threatens Greek approaches. Third, Truthmaker Trinitarianism does not imply that God is a fourth substance over and above the substances of the Father, Son, and Spirit, as Greek approaches threaten to do. Indeed, since truths about God supervene on truths about the Father, Son, and Spirit, the Truthmaker Trinitarian will maintain that God is nothing over and above the Father, Son, and Spirit, just as the ontologically serious metaphysician will maintain that the statue is nothing over and above its particles. Finally, there is a robust sense in which each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" according to Truthmaker Trinitarianism. Indeed, each "is God" as much as any substance is. This is strikingly different from the Greek approaches discussed above, where there is very clearly a substance which is more fully divine than each of the Father, Son, and Spirit, these latter having at most a secondary, derivative kind of divinity.

Let the foregoing account of Truthmaker Trinitarian consusbstantiality, illustration of how this account is to be applied, and explanation of how it

maintains (1)–(3) and does so in a way that does not succumb to the same problems that plausibly threaten the approaches surveyed in the previous section suffice for an initial statement of Truthmaker Trinitarianism. I further clarify and defend this view in response to several objections in the final section below.

3. Responses to Objections

This final section responds to several of the best objections to Truthmaker Trinitarianism of which I am aware. My hope is that even if the reader does not find my responses to these objections ultimately convincing she will agree that the responses at least point in promising enough directions that Truthmaker Trinitarianism should continue to be considered alongside Latin, Greek, and Constitution Trinitarianisms as a potential answer to the philosophical challenge of the Trinity that is well–worth further investigation. One strategy I will employ several times below is to show that if a particular objection threatens Truthmaker Trinitarianism, then it threatens at least some of these other approaches as well; thus, the objection does not uncover a unique problem for Truthmaker Trinitarianism.

Objection 1: The Father, Son, and Spirit are not divine. Truthmaker Trinitarianism clearly teaches that there is only one member of the kind, God. But, this member of the kind, God, is neither identical to the Father, nor the Son, nor the Spirit. Indeed, neither the Father, nor the Son, nor the Spirit is a member of the kind, God, on Truthmaker Trinitarianism. How, then, can the Truthmaker Trinitarian defend the claim that each of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit "is God?"

Reply: My reply is that Truthmaker Trinitarianism can maintain that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" in much the same sense in which the members of several distinct sets of particles "are Athena." I'm not proposing that this implies that the Father, Son, and Spirit *are* members of the kind, God. Rather, I am proposing an alternative understanding of what it is in virtue of which the Father, Son and Spirit each "is God." They aren't each God because they are members of the kind, God. Rather, each "is God" because of the role played by each in making true claims that are exclusively about the one and only member of the kind, God.

The fact that Truthmaker Trinitarianism proposes a unique sense in which each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" is not unique to this version of Trinitarianism. Indeed, Latin and Greek Trinitarianisms can also be understood as proposing unique senses in which each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God." According to Latin approaches, each "is God" in the same sense in which seated Socrates "is Socrates." According to Greek approaches, each "is God" in the sense

that the parts of a dog "are dog," supposing we grant that there is such a sense. In neither case is it clear that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" because each is a member of the kind, God.

Objection 2: There isn't really a God. While Truthmaker Trinitarianism proposes that there are truths about the one and only member of the kind, God, it refuses to grant any robust metaphysical status to this God. The one and only member of the kind, God, is not a substance, and it is said to be nothing more, metaphysically speaking, over and above the Father, Son, and Spirit. It is to be treated in the way that the ontologically parsimonious metaphysician treats statues. But this seems to make Truthmaker Trinitarianism a form of atheism. Ultimately, on this view, there is no God.

Reply: I reply, first, that Truthmaker Trinitarianism is not a form of atheism. Indeed, the claim "God exists" is made true by more than one equally minimal truthmaker—one with the Father as its substantial constituent, one with the Son as its substantial constituent, and one with the Spirit as its substantial constituent.

Second, I reply that the question of what metaphysical status God is awarded is one that admits of different interpretations. If we want to know whether God is a substance, Truthmaker Trinitarianism may propose an affirmative answer. After all, the claim "God is a substance" is plausibly made true by three equally minimal truthmakers—one with the Father as its substantial constituent, one with the Son, and one with the Spirit. Indeed, since God "is" (in the truthmaker sense) each of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and each of the Father, Son, and Spirit is identical to a distinct substance, it follows that God "is" (in the truthmaker sense) each of three non–identical substances. Certainly, then, God "is" a substance—the substance that is identical to the Father, the substance that is identical to the Son, and the substance that is identical to the Spirit.

But it may be that what the question is getting at is something else. Perhaps what the one who asks the question wants to know is instead whether God is a substance and this substance is *not* the same substance as the Father, Son, or Spirit. What she wants to know is whether God, *as distinguished from* the Father, Son, and Spirit, is a substance in its own right. If so, then Truthmaker Trinitarianism will propose a negative answer. For, on Truthmaker Trinitarianism, the only substance God "is" is the substance that is identical to the Father, the substance that is identical to the Son, and the substance that is identical to the Spirit. Yet, it isn't clear that offering a negative answer to this question is problematic. For, granting the status of substance to God as distinguished from the Father, Son, and Spirit is not clearly required in order to maintain (1)–(3). Moreover, the attempts to answer the philosophical challenge of the Trinity surveyed above that do grant such a

status to God as distinguished from the Father, Son, and Spirit, arguably run into difficulties precisely because they do so. If one grants the status of substance to God as distinguished from the Father, Son, and Spirit, one is faced with a dilemma. One can either grant to the Father, Son, and Spirit the status of substance also, as Greek approaches do, or one can refuse this status to the Father, Son, and Spirit, as Latin approaches do. Going the former route one must wrestle with polytheism and denying full divinity to the Father, Son, and Spirit; going the latter route one must wrestle with modalism. By contrast, it is noteworthy that the Constitution Trinitarian refuses to grant God the status of a substance that is not the same as the substance of the Father, Son, or Spirit. For the Constitution Trinitarian, the only substance God "is" is the same substance as the Father, Son, and Spirit.[18] Truthmaker Trinitarianism agrees with this insight of Constitution Trinitarianism. God "is" a substance, since God "is" each of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and each of the Father, Son, and Spirit is a substance. But God is not a substance that is not the substance that is the Father, Son, or Spirit. We might state the point slightly differently using the title "the Trinity". There is a Trinity on Truthmaker Trinitarianism, but this Trinity is not a substance over–and–above the substances of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This Trinity is rather the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit; it is not a single substance of its own.

Objection 3: Truthmaker Trinitarianism merely stipulates that there is only one member of the kind, God, and this is unfair. Truthmaker Trinitarianism says that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God." But, the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct substances. Why, then, does Truthmaker Trinitarianism not teach that there is more than one God? It seems that the only answer available to the Truthmaker Trinitarian is that this is simply how she has defined things. She has simply stipulated that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit "is God" only in that each serves as the substantial constituent of minimal truthmakers for claims about *the only member of the kind, God*. But, this seems unfair. She should not get to simply assume that there is only one member of the kind, God, for there to be truths about. She needs to explain how it could be that, despite their non–identity, the Father, Son, and Spirit make true claims about numerically the same God.

Reply: It is true that the Truthmaker Trinitarian's account of the consubstantiality of the Father, Son, and Spirit presumes that there is only one member of the kind, God, about whom there are truths. But this should not be taken to imply that the Truthmaker Trinitarian simply *assumes* that, despite their non–identity, each of the Father, Son, and Spirit can serve as the substantial

---

[18] See (Rea 2009: 715) and (Rea 2011 section 6).

constituents of minimal truthmakers for claims about numerically the same God. Rather, her proposal should be understood as follows. The Father, Son, and Spirit are consubstantial in that they stand in relations to one another that are sufficient for them to each serve as the substantial constituents of minimal truthmakers for claims about numerically the same God. Now, granted, I haven't yet offered a theory as to exactly in what these relations consist. But, I have employed an analogy in order to show that such relations can obtain between more mundane things in the world, and that when they do, they can secure claims parallel to (1)–(3). My proposal isn't that exactly such relations obtain between the Father, Son, and Spirit, but that relations much like these do. Indeed, to be slightly more specific, the Truthmaker Trinitarian will propose that, like the overlap in membership between the distinct sets of particles that make true claims about Athena, it is a certain kind of overlap between the divine Persons, though not an overlapping of sharing parts,[19] that enables them to serve as the substantial constituents of equally minimal truthmakers for claims about God. The overlap in the case of the Trinitarian Persons will likely consist instead in a certain kind of sharing of character and activity.[20]

By approaching things in this way, the Truthmaker Trinitarian is on roughly equal footing with advocates of Latin and Greek Trinitarianisms. The Latin Trinitarian explains consubstantiality in terms of some kind of metaphysical dependence. She doesn't explain *exactly* in what this metaphysical dependence consists. But, she employs an analogy in which a metaphysical dependence obtains between more mundane things where this metaphysical dependence is *like* that she proposes obtains between the Father, Son, Spirit and God and where it plausibly secures claims paralleling (1)–(3). The Greek Trinitarian explains consubstantiality in terms of parthood, but she doesn't explain the exact part–to–whole relation that she thinks obtains between the Father, Son, Spirit and God. Rather, she employs an analogy in which a part–to–whole relation obtains between more mundane things where this relation is *like* that she proposes obtains between the Father, Son, Spirit and God and where it plausibly secures claims paralleling (1)–(3). Likewise, the Truthmaker Trinitarian explains consubstantiality in terms of equally minimal truthmakers. She doesn't explain exactly what relations obtain between the Father, Son, and Spirit which enables them to serve as equally minimal truthmakers for claims about God, but she does offer an analogy in which distinct sets of particles are related in such a way as to serve as equally minimal truthmakers for claims

---

[19] See (Tuggy 2013).

[20] It is exactly this sort of overlap that Cross (2002) identifies as one of two central claims about the Trinity affirmed in common by both eastern and western traditions.

about the only member of the statue kind in such a way that claims paralleling (1)–(3) are maintained, and she proposes that the relations between these entities are *like* those between the Father, Son, and Spirit. It is not clear, then, that this third objection poses any more unique threat to Truthmaker Trinitarianism than is posed by the first two objections. The advocate of Truthmaker Trinitarianism has followed just those steps of articulation and analogy followed by her rival Trinitarian theorizers, and so should not be accused of having made unfair assumptions in defense of her account. It is true of course that this leaves further work to be done—specifically, further work to be done regarding in exactly what respect the divine Persons overlap so as to enable them to serve in the relevant truth–making role with respect to claims about God.[21] But the very framework of thinking of the divine Persons as serving in such a role and it thereby being true that each "is God" without this requiring that there are three Gods is a fecund starting point for this further Trinitarian theorizing.

4. Conclusion

This paper has offered a novel answer to the philosophical challenge of the Trinity. The novel approach, which I call Truthmaker Trinitarianism, proposes that each of the Father, Son, and Spirit is the substantial constituent of equally minimal truthmakers for claims about the one God. I have argued that this approach allows one to defend the three claims that generate the philosophical problem of the Trinity without threatening to imply the same errors that Latin, Greek, and Constitution Trinitarianisms threaten to imply. Finally, I have pointed the way forward toward answering some of the most initially worrisome objections that might be raised against Truthmaker Trinitarianism. If the arguments of this paper are on the right track, then I submit that Truthmaker Trinitarianism be considered alongside Latin, Greek, and Constitution Trinitarianisms as a potential answer to the philosophical problem of the Trinity that is worthy of further future investigation.[22]

---

[21] For my part, I think some of this further work may involve the nascent work of metatheology focused on just what it is to be God (cf. here Kvanvig MS). What is needed is an approach to thinking about what it is to be God such that the union of the divine Persons satisfies this conception. Kvanvig's own approach in terms of worship-worthiness and creation of all may in fact prove serviceable, if it is the substances of the Father, Son, and Spirit together that are most worthy of worship and together responsible for creation.

[22] I am grateful to several anonymous referees for helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

Bibliography

Armstrong, David M. 2004. *Truth and Truthmakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511487552.

Ayres, Lewis. 2004. *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth–Century Trinitarian Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0198755066.001.0001.

Barnes, Michel. 1995. "De Régnon Reconsidered." *Augustinian Studies* 26, 2: 51–79. https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies199526213.

Briggs, Rachel. 2012. "Truthmaking without Necessitation." *Synthese* 189, 1: 11–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-012-0093-z.

Cain, J. 1989. "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Logic of Relative Identity." *Religious Studies* 25: 141–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500001761.

Cameron, Ross. 2010. "How to Have a Radically Minimal Ontology." *Philosophical Studies* 151, 2: 249–64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9442-2.

Christian Reformed Church. 1988. *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*. Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications.

Craig, William L. "Trinity Monotheism Once More: A Response to Daniel Howard–Snyder." *Philosophia Christi* 8, 1: 101–13.

Cross, Richard. 2002. "Two Models of the Trinity?" *Heythrop Journal* 43: 275 – 94. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2265.00195.

Hasker, William. 2010. "Objections to Social Trinitarianism." *Religious Studies* 46, 4: 421–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412510000107.

Hasker, William. 2012. "Dancers, Rugby Players, and Trinitarian Persons." *Faith and Philosophy* 29, 3: 325–33. https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil201229332.

Hasker, William. 2013. *Metaphysics and the Tri–Personal God*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199681518.001.0001.

Howard–Snyder, Daniel. 2003. "Trinity Monotheism." *Philosophia Christi* 5, 2: 375–403. https://doi.org/10.5840/pc20035245.

Kvanvig, Jonathan. MS. *The Nature of God: An Essay in Metatheology*.

Leftow, Brian. 1999. "Anti Social Trinitarianism." In *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall and G. O'Collins, 203–49. New York: Oxford University Press.

Leftow, Brian. 2004. "A Latin Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 21: 304–333. https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil200421328.

Leftow, Brian. 2007. "Modes without Modalism," pp. 357 – 375 in *Persons: Human and Divine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Makin, Mark. 2018. "God from God: The Essential Dependence Model of Eternal Generation." *Religious Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412518000197.

Martinich, A. P. 1978. "Identity and Trinity." *The Journal of Religion*, 58: 169–181. https://doi.org/10.1086/486611.

McCall, Thomas and Michael Rea, eds. 2009. *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199216215.001.0001.

McGrath, Alister. 2007. *Christian Theology: An Introduction, 4th edition*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.

McLaughlin, Brian and Karen Bennett. 2011. "Supervenience." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Available online at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/supervenience/#3.3

Merricks, Trenton. 2006. "Split Brains and the Godhead," in *Knowledge and Reality: Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Thomas Crisp et al. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Moreland, James P. and William Lane Craig. 2003. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Morris, Thomas V. 1989. *Our Idea of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

O'Conaill, Donnchadh and Tuomas E. Tahko. 2016. "Minimal Truthmakers." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 97, 2: 228–244. https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12064.

Plantinga, Cornelius, Jr. 1989. "Social Trinity and Tritheism." In *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. Feenstra and Plantinga, 21–47. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Pruss, Alexander. 2008. "On Two Problems of Divine Simplicity." In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, volume 1, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig, 150–67. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rea, Michael. 2009. "The Trinity." In *the Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea, 689–734. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199289202.003.0019.

Rea, Michael. 2011. "Hylomorphism and the Incarnation." In *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Jonah Hill, 134–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199583164.003.0007.

Rettler, Bradley. 2016. "The General Truthmaker View of Ontological Commitment." *Philosophical Studies* 173, 5: 1405–1425. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0526-x.

Swinburne, Richard. 1994. *The Christian God.* New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0198235127.001.0001.

Tuggy, Dale. 2003. "The Unfinished Business of Trinitarian Theorizing." *Religious Studies* 39: 165–83.

Tuggy, Dale. 2013. "Hasker's Quests for a Viable Social Theory." *Faith and Philosophy* 30, 2: 171–87. https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil201330213.

Tuggy, Dale. 2016. "Trinity." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Available online at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/

van Inwagen, Peter. 1995. "And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God." In *God, Knowledge, and Mystery*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 222–59.

van Inwagen, Peter. 2003. "Three Persons in One Being: On Attempts to Show That the Doctrine of the Trinity is Self–Contradictory." In *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue*, ed. M. Y. Stewart, 83–97. Boston: Kluwer.