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In recent philosophical theology, various accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity, the claim that the Christian God is triune (existing in three persons), have tried to steer a middle path between two heresies. On one hand, orthodoxy is threatened by tritheism, the heretical view that there are three Gods, while on the other hand, avoiding tritheism runs the risk of falling into modalism, the heretical view that the individual persons of the Trinity are merely modes of the same entity. Social Trinitarianism tries to avoid modalism by stressing the distinctness of the divine persons. In so doing, it has faced accusations of tritheism. Latin Trinitarianism, by contrast, stresses the unity of God, at the expense of the distinctness of the persons and has traditionally been accused, by its detractors, of modalism.¹ Social Trinitarianism has traditionally been much favoured by the Eastern Church, while the most notable exponents of the Latin view have come from the Western Church (though by no means are all Western theologians defenders of Latin Trinitarianism). One of the historical reasons for the disagreement is the greater role accorded to the Athanasian Creed by the Western Church, and the corresponding emphasis placed by the latter on each of the persons of the Trinity being God ‘whole and entire’. In recent years, perhaps the most important defender of the Latin tradition, and critic of Social Trinitarianism, has been Brian Leftow (1999), who has argued that, amongst other problems with Social Trinitarianism, it risks collapsing into a form of Arianism, because it posits multiple ways in which something may be divine. However, as we shall see, constructing a Trinitarian account which avoids positing multiple ways of being divine is no easy feat. This paper will consider whether any of the Latin accounts of the Trinity can satisfy this proposed condition on orthodoxy.

In Section I, I set out the logical problem of the Trinity. In Section II, I outline the theological commitments that, according to one interpretation of the Latin tradition, rule Social Trinitarianism out as a model of the doctrine of the Trinity. In Section III, I consider the major Latin accounts of the Trinity in the contemporary literature and argue that only a “Strong” Theory of Relative Identity can satisfy the Latin theological *disiderata* identified in Section II. Finally, in Section IV, I outline the cost of accepting such a theory by developing what I take to be the most serious objection to a Strong Theory of Relative Identity, that it is not compatible with classical semantics. I argue that it has not always been appreciated how deep this incompatibility goes, and I conclude that the Strong Theory of Relative Identity requires a non-classical semantics. The conclusion to be taken from these considerations is that a coherent account of the Trinity which avoids positing multiple ways of being divine does exist, but that the philosophical costs of adopting such an account are steep.

1 The Logical Problem of the Trinity

For the western Church at least, the definitive statement of the doctrine of the Trinity can be found in the Athanasian Creed. The Athanasian Creed involves 44 theological theses concerning the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Amongst these theses are the following three:

¹See McCall and Rea 2009: 1-15 and Moreland and Craig 2003 for good recent accounts of the difference between these two approaches.

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9 (1) 'We worship God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity... Neither con-
10 founding the persons nor dividing the substance.'

11
12 (2) 'So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is
13 God.'

14
15 (3) 'And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.'

16
17
18 However, the conjunction of these three theses has the appearance of contra-
19 diction. Indeed, under quite plausible interpretations, a contradiction can be
20 derived quite simply.

21 For example, if we treat 'God' as a count noun (a noun which can occur
22 in the plural), formally to be written ' G ', 'person' also as a count noun, to be
23 written as ' P ', 'is' as denoting the relation of identity, to be written '=', and
24 the relation ' x is the same F as y ', to be written ' $=_F$ ', as equivalent to ' x is an
25 F and y is an F and $x=y$ ', for any count noun, F , then it seems plausible to
26 take (1) to entail

27
28 (4) $P(\text{the Father}) \wedge P(\text{the Son}) \wedge P(\text{the Holy Spirit}) \wedge \text{the Father}$
29 $\neq_P \text{the Son} \wedge \text{the Son} \neq_P \text{the Holy Spirit} \wedge \text{the Holy Spirit} \neq_P \text{the}$
30 $\text{Father},$
31

32 to translate (2) as

33
34 (5) $G(\text{The Father}) \wedge G(\text{The Son}) \wedge G(\text{The Holy Spirit}),$
35

36 and to take (3) to entail

37
38 (6) $\forall x \forall y G(x) \wedge G(y) \rightarrow x =_G y.$
39

40 If we also assume the following, initially plausible, rule of inference:²

41
42 (SRI)
$$\frac{x =_F y \wedge F^1(x)}{x =_{F^1} y}$$

43
44

45 the, from these, the following deduction is possible:

46
47 **Proof**

- 48 1. $G(\text{the Father})$ Omitting Conjunction on (5)
49 2. $G(\text{the Son})$ Omitting Conjunction on (5)
50 3. $\text{The Father} =_G \text{the Son}$ (1), (2), (6)
51 4. $P(\text{The Father})$ Omitting Conjunction on (4)
52 5. $\text{The Father} \neq_P \text{the Son}$ Omitting Conjunction on (4)
53 6. $\text{The Father} =_P \text{the Son}$ (SRI) on 3,4
54 $\perp_{5,6}$
55

56
57 ²Strictly speaking ' F ' and ' F^1 ' here schematically represent any sortals. Sortals are a
58 subset of count nouns which convey a criterion of identity for the individuals falling under
59 them. 'Woman' is a sortal, because there are a determinate number of women in the class,
60 for example. 'Thing' is not a sortal, because it is not the case that there are a determinate
61 number of things in the class.
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9 Therefore, a very plausible interpretation of the Athenasian Creed, along
10 with one plausible rule of inference for relativized identity relations (relations
11 such as $=_F$) leads to contradiction. A series of strategies have been proposed
12 to escape this consequence, to which I turn next.

13 For what follows, to simplify matters and to avoid the ambiguity between
14 the use of ‘God’ as a count noun and as a proper name, I will adopt the device
15 (except when quoting) of replacing ‘God’ with ‘the Godhead’ when I intend to
16 carry out singular reference, and ‘divinity’ when I intend to use a count noun.
17
18

19 2 Social and Latin Trinitarianism

20
21 One way to escape this problem is to adopt a form of Social Trinitarianism. As
22 McCall and Rea explain the approach,
23

24 ST (Social Trinitarianism) is usually associated ... with the claims
25 that it “starts” with threeness and moves toward oneness, that the
26 divine persons are numerically distinct, and that the unity of the
27 Trinity can be understood by way of a “social analogy”: the divine
28 persons are relevantly like a family, a supremely unified community
29 of monarchs, or three human persons whose interpersonal relation-
30 ships are so strong as to be unbreakable. (McCall and Rea 2009:
31 2)
32

33 We can get a better handle on this by considering one influential version of
34 Social Trinitarianism. Richard Swinburne sets out his views as follows:
35

36 On the account which I have given, the three divine individuals
37 taken together would form a collective source of the being of all
38 other things; the members would be totally mutually dependent and
39 necessarily jointly behind each other’s acts. This collective would be
40 indivisible in its being for logical reasons—that is, the kind of being
41 that it would be is such that each of its members is necessarily
42 everlasting, and would not have existed unless it had brought about
43 or been brought about by the others ... The claim that ‘there is only
44 one God’ is to be read as the claim that the source of being of all
45 other things has to it this kind of indivisible unity.
46

47 But then how is the claim that each of the individuals is “God” to
48 be understood? Simply as the claim that each is divine-omnipotent,
49 perfectly good, etc. (Swinburne 1994: 27)
50

51 Swinburne’s account involves the claim that the Godhead is ‘a collective’. The
52 persons are distinct entities, which, taken together, compose the divine collec-
53 tive. Other versions of Social Trinitarianism involve some other general term
54 in place of ‘collective’. For example, David Brown (1985, see also Leftow 1999:
55 217-221) sees the Godhead as something like a group mind, composed of three
56 constituent minds. While C. Stephen Layman (1988) holds that the Godhead
57 is the bearer of the sum of the properties of the three persons. So, while each of
58 the persons of the Trinity are not omnipotent, the three persons taken together
59 are omnipotent. All of these versions of Social Trinitarianism are structurally
60 alike in the following respect. The Godhead is something over and above any
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9 one of the persons which constitute it, and the truth of statements of the form
10 'x is divine' is grounded in x's possession of certain divine properties rather
11 than any identification of x with the Godhead. This means that, though the
12 persons bear some salient relation to the Godhead, the persons are not them-
13 selves Godheads. This would mean that the relation '... is the same Godhead
14 as...' is not an identity relation and therefore the crucial inference from (3,4) to
15 (6) of the formal proof is blocked.

16 A long theological and philosophical tradition stands opposed to accounts
17 such as these. Some of the objections target the coherence of Social Trinitarian
18 accounts like Swinburne's. Others target the theological implications of the
19 account, for example whether it can make sense of divine properties. However,
20 the objection that I am interested in for this paper comes from Brian Leftow
21 (1999).

22 Leftow has argued that Social Trinitarian accounts depend for their coher-
23 ence on an ambiguous use of the term 'divine', such that the Godhead is divine
24 in a different sense of the word than the sense in which each of the persons is
25 divine. Leftow borrows a particular characterization of Arianism from Cornelius
26 Plantinga (1989),³ according to which, Arianism is the view that one or more
27 of the persons of the Trinity are divine only derivatively. Leftow argues that on
28 the Social Trinitarian account
29

30
31 [t]here is but one Trinity. But if we take the Trinity's claim to be one
32 God seriously, I argue, we wind up downgrading the Persons' deity
33 and/or unorthodox. If we do not, 'the Trinity' is just a convenient
34 way to refer to the three Persons, and talk of the Trinity makes
35 no progress towards monotheism. We soon also find that the moves
36 which most clearly show ST (Social Trinitarianism) to be monotheist
37 repeatedly threaten to slide into Plantinga's sort of Arianism, the
38 positing of more than one way to be divine.
39

40 Later, he returns to the charge of Arianism, saying

41
42 ...even if Trinity monotheism avoids talk of degrees of deity, it faces
43 a problem. Either the Trinity is a fourth case of the divine nature,
44 in addition to the Persons, or it is not. If it is, we have too many
45 cases of deity for orthodoxy. If it is not, and yet is divine, there are
46 two ways of being divine—by being a case of deity, and by being a
47 Trinity of such cases.
48

49 Taken at face value, the claim that the Godhead and the persons must be
50 divine in just the same sense of the word 'divine' suggests the following principle:

51
52 (Divinity): 'the Godhead is divine' must be true in virtue of the
53 same kinds of facts as 'the Father (or the Son or the Holy Spirit) is
54 divine'.
55

56 ³Having borrowed the characterization of Arianism from Plantinga, Leftow argues that
57 Plantinga's own defence of Social Trinitarianism runs afoul of this kind of Arianism. Leftow
58 disagrees, in passing, with Plantinga's claim that this kind of Arianism is rejected by the
59 Nicene creed, but does still seem to think that this kind of Arianism is heretical (Leftow 1999:
60 221).
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9 (Divinity) accords well with a particular strand of theological tradition that
10 is taken by many in the west to be orthodoxy. This tradition emphasizes the
11 oneness of the Godhead by committing to the further thesis that each of the
12 persons of the Trinity is ‘wholly God’. This is meant not simply in the sense
13 of having no non-divine parts, but in the stronger sense of being all there is to
14 the Godhead. This tradition may well have started as a reaction to Arianism,
15 and can be traced to the council of Toledo in the seventh century, through
16 the Athanasian creed, through the writings of various Western Fathers and
17 medieval Doctors of the Church,⁴ to the modern day. No clearer statement of
18 this tradition can be found than that of the modern Catholic catechism:
19

20
21 The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves
22 but each of them is God whole and entire: “The Father is that which
23 the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son
24 that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e. by nature one God.” (*Catechism*
25 *of the Catholic Church* Part I, Section 2, Chapter 1)

26
27 If the Godhead is not shared out amongst the persons, but each of them is
28 all there is to the Godhead, then the persons will indeed be divine in just the
29 same way as the Godhead is divine. There will be nothing in virtue of which
30 the Godhead is divine, which does not hold also for each of the persons. I will
31 not try to motivate (Divinity), or defend the claim that it is a condition on
32 orthodoxy. Rather I am interested whether there is a coherent interpretation of
33 the doctrine of the Trinity that satisfies (Divinity) and what the philosophical
34 costs of such a view might be.

35 This tradition clearly rules out Social Trinitarianism as characterized above.
36 According to that view, as we saw, the persons constitute (or hold some similar
37 relation to) the Godhead, and this is just what is being denied by the Latin
38 tradition I am interested in here. I will next consider whether the major philo-
39 sophical models of Latin Trinitarianism that can be found in the contemporary
40 literature can go any further towards answering the logical problem.
41

42 **3 Latin Trinitarianism: Current Accounts**

43
44 We may classify contemporary Latin accounts into several groups. There are
45 those theories, going back to Duns Scotus, which take the relation of the God-
46 head to the persons of the Trinity to be something like the relation between
47 universals and their instances.⁵ There are accounts, following Abelard (Brower
48 2004, a similar view is defended more recently by Rea 2003), according to which
49 the relation that holds between the Godhead and the persons is a relation of
50 numerical sameness but not one of genuine identity. Then there are the relative
51

52
53 ⁴For example, see Hilary of Poitiers

54
55 It seems impossible that one object should be both within and without another,
56 or that ... these Beings can reciprocally contain One Another, so that One should
57 permanently envelope, and also be permanently enveloped by, the Other, whom
58 yet He envelopes. This is a problem which the wit of man will never solve, nor
59 will human research ever find an analogy for this condition of Divine existence.
60 But what man cannot understand, God can be. *Concerning the Trinity* 3:1

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62 ⁵The view defended by Jeffrey Brouwer and Michael Rea (2005) has a *prima facie* similarity
63 to this view, though in a curious inverted form.
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identity accounts, which hold that the Godhead is the same divinity as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, respectively (each of these is also the same divinity as each of the others), however, none of the persons is the same person as any of the others, or as the Godhead. According to a relative identity account of the Trinity, the relations ‘...is the same divinity as...’ and ‘...is the same person as...’ are not relations of classical identity (equivalence relations which guarantee the indiscernibility of their *relata*), nevertheless, they are relations of numerical identity (from ‘*x* is the same divinity as *y*’, we can infer ‘there is one divinity’). Peter Geach (1961) A.P. Martinich (1978, 1979), Peter van Inwagen (1988, 2003), James Cain (1989), Christopher Hughes (2009), and C.H. Conn (2012) have worked on this approach. The first we will consider, however, is Leftow’s own account, which involves an analogy with time travel.

If time travel is possible, then it is apparently possible for one and the same person to be multiply instantiated simultaneously (in public time) in different spatial locations. For example, it is possible for a person, Leftow names her ‘Jane’, to journey through time and join her earlier self. Presumably, if this is possible, it is possible for three instantiations of Jane to be present in the same room at one public time. Leftow suggests that this possibility serves as a model for the Trinity (2004). Each of the divine persons is like one of the instantiations of Jane; just as the three instantiations are all one and the same person, even though they do not have all the same properties (at least, they seem not to), so too, all three persons are one and the same divinity, and that single divinity is to be identified with a single divine substance persisting through time. It is easy to see why this account is generally considered a version of Latin Trinitarianism. The most apparent worry here is modalism rather than tritheism.

Leftow’s account depends, then, on the coherence of time travel. There are, of course, well known objections to the metaphysical possibility of time travel, which I will not rehearse here. Assuming these can be answered, however, a theological worry remains. Leftow must explain what ‘Jane’ refers to here, the single substance or one of the instantiations? If the former, then it seems we have reached straightforward modalism. If the latter, and we take talk of ‘three Janes’ seriously, then how is this to be distinguished from accounts of Social Trinitarianism, whereby the persons are parts of the whole substance?⁶

Leftow emphasizes that he conceives the relation between the substance and each of the instantiations as being one of identity. He rejects that the instantiations are parts of Jane, not even temporal parts (Leftow is an endurantist). This is sufficient to distinguish his position from Social Trinitarianism, but it raises interesting questions about the kind of identity relation Leftow has in mind.

It seems to me that if the kind of time travel that Leftow needs to motivate his case is possible, then one of the following must be false.

- (7) ‘There are three divinities’ if and only if ‘There is some *x*, some *y*, and some *z*, where each is non-identical with the others and each is a divinity.’

or

⁶For a more developed formulation of related concerns, see Hasker (2009).

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9 (8) All relations of numerical identity are characterized by unre-
10 stricted Leibniz's Law, that is, that if x and y are identical, then x
11 and y have all their properties in common.
12

13 It is easy to see why this is, if every Jane is identical to one common sub-
14 stance, then (assuming the Transitivity of Identity, which I don't imagine anyone
15 wishes to reject) each is identical with each of the others. At the same time,
16 the Janes do not have the same properties, for if they did then by parity of rea-
17 soning, so would the persons of the Trinity, and this really would be modalism.
18 So either the Janes can be one in cardinality although they are non-identical,
19 or they can be identical in spite of having different properties.
20

21 It seems, then, that Leftow has two options; reject (7) or reject (8). However,
22 I think that, regardless of which of these Leftow adopts, his account will not
23 satisfy (Divinity), the condition on successful Latin accounts of the Trinity which
24 seemed implicit in Leftow's own attack on Social Trinitarianism.

25 If Leftow rejects (7), then he rejects a very plausible thesis concerning the
26 relationship between identity and cardinality. Even then, though, this will not
27 provide an account of the Trinity on which (Divinity) is satisfied. For on this
28 account, the Godhead is divine in virtue of being identical with the Godhead,
29 whereas the persons are divine in virtue of being counted as one, without being
30 strictly identical. On this version of the account, then, there remain different
31 ways of being divine.

32 Alternatively, one might reject (8). For example, one might restrict Leibniz's
33 Law in the case of diachronic identity relations so that, rather than ranging over
34 all properties, it ranges over only intrinsic properties. Perhaps Leftow can show
35 that all the distinguishing properties of the individual persons are extrinsic and
36 therefore no obstacle to identifying the persons as one (whether this turns out to
37 be modalism is still a real worry, but not the one that interests me here). How-
38 ever, this attempt does no better with respect to satisfying (Divinity), because,
39 again, a importantly different kind of relation obtains between the persons and
40 the Godhead from that which obtains between the Godhead and the Godhead.
41 In the former case, to avoid contradiction, it must be the case that the relation
42 that holds between any one of the persons and the Godhead is non-Leibnizian,
43 because they clearly do not have exactly the same properties. If it is an iden-
44 tity relation, it must be a diachronic relation where sameness of property is
45 restricted to intrinsic properties, or something similar. The relation between
46 the Godhead and the Godhead, by contrast is a relation of synchronic identity
47 which does satisfy Leibniz's Law. It is by virtue of satisfying the latter, more
48 fundamental relation, that the Godhead is divine, whereas it is by satisfying a
49 weaker relation that the persons are divine.
50

51 Similar considerations, unsurprisingly, show that numerical sameness and
52 instantiation accounts of the Latin Trinity also fail to satisfy (Divinity). The
53 former are no different than the rejection of (7) above. These accounts posit
54 a relation weaker than identity, and claim that it holds between each of the
55 persons of the Trinity and the Godhead. These accounts do not, however, deny
56 that genuine numerical identity exists. The Godhead, then, is still numerically
57 identical with itself. Once again, it seems this account is committed to the
58 Godhead being divine in virtue of satisfying a more fundamental relation to
59 itself than the relation that grounds the claim that each of the persons is divine.
60 Accounts like that of Duns Scotus, on which the relation that holds between
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the Godhead and the persons can be understood by analogy to the relation between a universal and its instantiations (or on the Brouwer and Rea 2005 view, according to which the relation is like the relation between a primary substance and a second substance), of course, also fail to satisfy (Divinity) for the same reasons. These accounts do not reject that the Godhead is genuinely numerically identical with the Godhead, and the relation that they claim holds between the persons and the Godhead is weaker than this identity relation. The Godhead’s divinity is, then, grounded in a more fundamental relation than the person’s divinity.

I take it to be a plausible thesis that the Godhead is divine simply in virtue of being identical with the, by hypothesis, one and only Godhead. If this is so, however, it is clear that no account of the Trinity can satisfy (Divinity) while assuming classical logic. The price of orthodoxy, if orthodoxy really does involve the satisfaction of (Divinity), is adopting a non-classical logic. There are several *prima facie* possibilities.

One possibility that has not been discussed at any length in the existing literature is to adopt a paraconsistent logic, accepting that the orthodox account of the Trinity is inconsistent, yet nevertheless true. However, paraconsistent logic, apart from its radical departure from classical logic, also accords ill with theological orthodoxy. The prospective benefit of adopting a paraconsistent logic, with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, is that it allows the logical possibility of the various theological doctrines being simultaneously true, although they contradict one another. However, this sort of solution is very difficult to square with orthodoxy, statements of which are often framed in terms which seem to presuppose the law of non-contradiction. Take, for example the Athenasian Creed once again. It is not sufficient for orthodoxy that we hold that the inconsistent conjunction ‘there is exactly one God and it is not the case that there is exactly one God, because there are three’ be true. Consider the 18th line of the Creed,

[f]or like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords.

Affirming the doctrines, then, is necessary but not sufficient for orthodoxy. Orthodoxy also involves not affirming the negations of the doctrines. This is just what would be involved in a solution depending on paraconsistency.

Apart from paraconsistency, the obvious alternative for blocking the deduction on page 2 is by rejecting the problematic rule of inference that I have called ‘SRI’. This can be done by adopting a non-classical view of how relations like ‘=*F*’ work. This is represented in the literature by the relative identity response to the logical problem of the Trinity, to which we turn next.

3.1 The Relative Identity Solution

The relative identity response was first proposed by Peter Geach (1961, 1967). Geach attributes a theory of relative identity to Thomas Aquinas, and we can get a better grasp the significance of relative identity for Latin Trinitarianism, if we consider Geach’s account of Aquinas.

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9 A few remarks on the logic of “there is but one God” and “the one
10 and only God.” On Russell’s theory of descriptions “the one and
11 only God is X ” would be construed as meaning:

12 “For some y , y is God, and for any z , if z is God, z is the same
13 as y , and y is X ”; And this, shorn of the final clause “and y is
14 X ”, would also give the analysis of “there is but one God.” Aquinas
15 would certainly have objected, on general grounds, to the clause “ z
16 is the same as y ”; the sameness, as we saw, must for him be specified
17 by some general term signifying a form of nature. Now the general
18 term that we need to supply here is clearly “God”; so “there is but
19 one God” will come out as:

20
21 “For some y , y is God, and, for any z , if z is God, z is the same
22 God as y .” It is important to notice that this would leave open the
23 possibility of there being several Divine Persons; there would still be
24 but one God, if we could truly say that any Divine Person was the
25 same God as any other Divine Person. (Anscombe and Geach 1961:
26 118)
27

28 Therefore, on this view, all the x s that are divine are also the same divinity
29 as the Godhead, and together add up with the Godhead to a total of one di-
30 vinity. The relation ‘... is the same divinity as...’ is taken, by relative identity
31 theorists, to be a genuine relation of numerical identity. This means that nu-
32 merical identity relations can cross-cut, such that some x and y can be the same
33 divinity and yet be different persons. On this view, this is simply how numerical
34 identity relations work, and does not involve any incoherence. Some entity(ies)
35 can be one when divided up according to one sortal-relative identity relation,
36 while they can be three when divided up according to a different sortal-relative
37 identity relation. If the relations ‘... is the same divinity as...’ and ‘... is the
38 same person as...’ were relations of classical identity (that is, relations char-
39 acterized by Leibniz’s Law, Symmetry, Transitivity, and, given the presence of
40 sortals in these relations, Weak Reflexivity) this would be contradictory.⁷ So
41 relative identity theorists reject that these sortal-relative relations of numerical
42 identity satisfy Leibniz’s Law.
43

44 It is important to note that this account comes in several importantly differ-
45 ent forms. The distinction that matters for our present purposes is that between
46 what I shall call ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ theories of relative identity. Weak theories
47 of relative identity hold that there are absolute identity relations (character-
48 ized by Leibniz’s Law) and relative identity relations (for which Leibniz’s Law
49 fails). Strong theories of relative identity hold that the only numerical identity
50 relations that there are are non-Leibnizian relative identity relations.
51

52 Historically, Geach has been alone in committing himself to strong relative
53 identity (1967). Other relative identity theorists have typically taken the rejec-
54 tion of absolute identity to be an unnecessary encumbrance to the theory which
55 undermines its independent plausibility.⁸ Peter van Inwagen, in his influential
56 1988 paper ‘And yet there are three Gods’, which reintroduced relative identity
57

58 ⁷Proof: Assume the Father is the same divinity as the Son, and that the Father is not
59 the same person as the Son. By Leibniz’s Law, all and only the properties of the Father are
60 properties of the Son. The Father does not have the property of being the same person as the
61 Son. But, by Reflexivity, the Son does have this property. This is a contradiction.

62 ⁸For example, Garbacz 2002, Griffin 1977.

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9 as an approach to the logical problem of the Trinity, declares himself neutral
10 on the existence of absolute, non-relativized, identity (1988: 259). However, it
11 is with respect to the satisfaction of (Divinity) that we can see why a relative
12 identity theorist interested in providing a response to the logical problem of the
13 Trinity might reject the existence of absolute identity altogether.

14 The weak relative identity theorist is in the same position as the defender of
15 a ‘sameness-without-identity’ account of the Trinity, indeed they have a difficult
16 time explaining how their account is any different. Once again, if it is allowed
17 that there are genuine relations of absolute unrelativized identity, then it is
18 overwhelmingly plausible (barring any particular reason for thinking otherwise)
19 that the Godhead has this relation to itself. The Godhead, then, has this
20 fundamental relation to itself, while the persons have the weaker, and one might
21 certainly think derived, relation of sortal-relative identity ‘...is the same divinity
22 as...’ to the Godhead. This account fails to satisfy (Divinity) and certainly
23 seems to be involving two different ways of being divine, one more fundamental
24 than the other and attaching only to the Godhead.

25 The Strong Theory of Relative Identity, by contrast, will not, in fact cannot,
26 say that the Godhead is absolutely identical with itself, for it holds that there
27 is no such relation as ‘... is absolutely identical with...’. Rather, the strongest
28 relation that the Godhead bears to itself is the relation ‘... is the same divinity
29 as...’. It is in virtue of this relation, then, that the Godhead is divine. This is
30 of course the same relation that each of the persons of the Trinity has to the
31 Godhead as well. In addition, the three divine persons bears the relation ‘... is a
32 different person from ...’ to each of the other persons. This is why there are three
33 persons, but one divinity. Note that on this account the threeness of the persons
34 has no priority over the oneness of the divinity, the relative identity account of
35 the Trinity involves two different relations of genuine identity (as opposed to
36 equivalence) which cross-cut each other. On this account, the Trinity is not
37 three different objects that have some common property that allows them to be
38 counted as one in some derivative way. Rather it is a reality that does not in
39 itself have a cardinality, but can be counted as one or three according to which
40 of several equally legitimate identity relations is employed in the counting.

41 (Divinity) can only be satisfied by an account of the Trinity according to
42 which the strongest relation that the Godhead holds to the Godhead is the same
43 relation that each of the persons holds to the Godhead. This relation cannot be
44 absolute identity if the resulting account of the Trinity is to be consistent, so
45 it seems that the strongest relation that the Godhead can hold to the Godhead
46 must be a relative identity relation or something very much like it. This speaks
47 in favour of a strong relative identity account of the Trinity as the appropriate
48 one for the particular theological view that I have been interested in in this
49 paper.
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54 **4 Is the Strong Theory of Relative Identity co-** 55 **herent?** 56

57 If the Strong Theory of Relative Identity offers the greatest promise for the kind
58 of doctrine of the Trinity that is committed to (Divinity), then the incoherence
59 of the former would cast grave doubts on the coherence of the latter. More-
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over, many philosophers do think that the Strong Theory of Relative Identity is incoherent (Quine 1964, Alston and Bennett 1984, Dummett 1991, Hawthorne 2003, le Poidevin 2009). These worries would be, at least partly, answered, if a Strong Theory of Relative Identity could be provided with a provably consistent first-order system and accompanying semantics. Several consistent logical systems compatible with the Strong Theory of Relative Identity have been developed. However, as we shall see, there are grave doubts about the possibility of providing a coherent semantics in particular. In this section, I will outline this objection, the most serious that the theory faces, and argue that it is even more serious than has hitherto been recognized. I will finish by proposing one avenue of escape from the objection.

Several attempts have been made to develop logical systems for theories of relative identity, notably, by Stevenson (1975), Griffin and Routley (1979), van Inwagen (1995), and Garbacz (2002).⁹ Not all of these, however, will serve our present purposes. The Stevenson logic, for example, is a logic of relative identity in name only. In Stevenson's logic there are relations of identity that are relativized to general terms, but all such relations are Leibnizian. So statements of the form $\ulcorner a =_F b \wedge a \neq_{F^1} b \wedge (F^1(a) \vee F^1(b)) \urcorner$ are contradictory (Stevenson 1975: 195). However, the relative identity solution to the logical problem of the Trinity turns on facts about the Trinity having just this form, specifically that, for example, the Father and the Son are the same divinity, but different persons. Pawel Garbacz's series of logics for relative identity go further than Stevenson's system, but also fall short of what is required on this picture. For the reflexivity of classical absolute identity is a feature of each of these systems, from which it follows that the Godhead is identical with the Godhead, but on pain of contradiction with none of the persons, as explained above. The logical systems in the literature which do model the Strong Theory of Relative Identity are the weakest of the Routley and Griffin systems, named by them 'Theory 1', and the system sketched by van Inwagen.

van Inwagen's logic is a provably consistent system of natural deduction (van Inwagen 1988: 248-260), arrived at by adding just two new inference rules to the classical system of natural deduction for first-order logic (without identity). These are as follows:

Symmetry_{RI}

$$\frac{x =_F y}{y =_F x}$$

and

Transitivity_{RI}

$$\frac{x =_F y, y =_F z}{x =_F z}$$

⁹To be sure, there are other alternative systems of first-order logic which may be compatible with strong relative identity; for example Wehmeier's Wittgensteinian-inspired 'logic without objectual identity' (Wehmeier 2012) and Krause and French's Schrödinger logics (Krause and French 2006, first developed by Da Costa 1980). However, none of these is tailor-made for relative identity, and so I will not consider them further here.

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9 These are, of course, relative identity versions of Symmetry and Transitivity.¹⁰
10 However, van Inwagen does not provide a relative identity version of Reflexivity
11 and provides nothing similar to Leibniz's Law.

12 As the Quinean principle 'no entity without identity' retains its plausibility
13 even if the Geachean view of identity is true, some version of Reflexivity is
14 desirable. Such a rule can be supplied from the Routley and Griffin system
15 (1979: 76-77):
16

17 Reflexivity_{RI}

$$18 \frac{F(x)}{19 x =_F x}$$

20
21
22 On the other hand, the absence of any principle of substitutivity in a first-order
23 logic for strong relative identity is unavoidable, so no inference of the form
24

$$25 \frac{x =_F y, F^1(x)}{26 F^2(y)}$$

27
28 are valid in a first-order logic for strong relative identity. We need not, however,
29 follow van Inwagen in concluding that all such inferences are substantive meta-
30 physical theses and not guaranteed by logic (van Inwagen 1988: 256), because
31 second-order systems have the resources to provide principles of substitutivity
32 that are consistent with strong relative identity.¹¹ There are, therefore, formal
33 systems compatible with strong relative identity.
34

35 A curiosity of van Inwagen logic is that all reference is carried out by quanti-
36 fied expressions (van Inwagen 1988: 260), because van Inwagen believes singular
37 reference is incompatible with relative identity. The supposed incompatibility
38 of strong relative identity with singular reference is, in fact, frequently pointed
39 out by its detractors (Alston and Bennett 1984, Hawthorne 2003). van Inwagen
40 puts the point this way:

41
42 The philosopher who eschews classical, absolute identity must also
43 eschew singular terms, for the idea of a singular term is... at least in
44 currently orthodox semantic theory, bound to the classical semanti-
45 cal notion of reference or denotation; and this notion, in its turn, is
46 inseparably bound to the idea of classical identity. It is a part of the
47 orthodox semantical concept of reference that reference is a many-
48 one relation. And it is a part of the idea of a many-one relation—or
49 a one-one relation, for that matter—that if x bears such a relation to
50 y and bears it to z , then y and z are absolutely identical. (That's
51 what it says on the label.) (van Inwagen 1988: 259)
52

53 ¹⁰In fact, in van Inwagen's paper, they appear using the schematic letter ' I ' in place of the
54 symbol ' $=_F$ ', however the latter term, by involving a schematic term for sortals will allow us
55 to add a version of reflexivity as well, which would be impossible using the simple schematic
56 letter ' I '.

57 ¹¹An example can be found in Griffin and Routley's (1979) second-order system for relative
58 identity, in which they are able to define the notion of predicate 'domination'. That system
59 includes an absolute identity relation, but this is not required for the definition of property
60 domination.
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9 van Inwagen's point, then, is that the classical semantics for singular terms
10 depends on the relation between terms and denotations being many-one, and
11 that depends on absolute identity, in that, for a relation to be many-one, it
12 must be the case that there is one relata that is distinguished absolutely. And
13 indeed, classical semantics stipulates that the interpretation of any name in a
14 language is an element in the domain of discourse. Thus,

15
16 If N is the set of all names in a language, L , and S is a structure
17 $\langle D, I \rangle$, then, for every element $n \in N$, $I(n) \in D$.
18

19 van Inwagen thinks he escapes the problem, by ramsifying the terms 'Father',
20 'Son', so that all occurrences of these are replaced by the quantified expressions
21 ' x such that x begets' and ' x such that x is begotten' (van Inwagen 2003: 72-
22 73). He shows how we can state the orthodox account of the Trinity in this
23 way. However, eschewing singular terms, as van Inwagen does, will not on its
24 own solve the problem, because the issue generalizes, or so it seems. If classical
25 semantics is committed to the existence of absolute identity relations in order
26 to distinguish the referents of names, then it would appear that it is equally
27 committed to absolute identity relations in order to distinguish the assignments
28 of variables. This problem was, in fact, the first objection raised against theories
29 of relative identity by Quine in his review of Geach's *Reference and Generality*.
30

31 Quine says,

32
33 [t]his doctrine [Geach's denial of the existence of an absolute rela-
34 tion of identity] is antithetical to the very notion of quantification,
35 the mainspring of modern logic. Quantification depends upon there
36 being values of variables, same or different absolutely; grant quanti-
37 fication and there remains no choice about identity, not for variables.
38 For a language with quantification in it there is but one legitimate
39 version of " $x = y$ ". (Quine 1964: 101)
40

41 This point is expanded upon by Dummett,

42
43 If we are engaged in giving a verbal statement of the interpretation
44 of the object-language, we have first to specify the domain of the
45 variables. To give the interpretation of the non-logical constants,
46 we have to be able to refer in the metalanguage to elements of that
47 domain, or to pick out subsets of it. In order to know whether a
48 given interpretation is admissible, that is, intelligible, we must know
49 when two terms of the metalanguage pick out the same element of
50 the domain, since the requirement that one and the same element,
51 considered as picked out by each of two distinct singular terms of
52 the metalanguage, should behave differently in respect of the sat-
53 isfaction of some predicate of the object-language will render the
54 interpretation contradictory and so inadmissible. Hence, to give an
55 interpretation relative to a domain presupposes a relation of identity
56 defined over it. And, according to the present argument, the same
57 applies to the case in which we have only a mental apprehension,
58 rather than a verbal statement, of the interpretation. (Dummett
59 1991: 294)
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9 It is odd that many of the more recent discussions of relative identity have
10 focused on its incompatibility with the classical semantics for proper names.
11 This problem can be avoided by eschewing names, but a system that cannot be
12 provided with a semantics for proper names or bound variables is clearly not
13 going to be capable of doing the work required of it. In fact the problem goes
14 deeper even than this, as the Strong Theory of Relative Identity is incompatible
15 with the classical semantics for predicates as well, because the latter entails that
16 if $F_{n(n \geq 1)}$ is the set of all n -place predicates in L , then S must be such that for
17 every $\bar{F} \in F_n$, $I(\bar{F})$ is a set of n -tuples such that every element of every n -tuple
18 in $I(\bar{F})$ is an element in D .

19
20 What lies at the bottom of these incompatibilities, is that it is implicit
21 in classical model-theoretic semantics that there exists a collection of discrete
22 entities, which we have called D , which are the possible denotata of the singular
23 terms, the possible assignments of the variables and the elements of the n -
24 tuples which are taken as the referents of relations. Moreover, it is the standard
25 assumption that D is a ZF set. The traditional interpretation of the formal
26 language of set theory (both Naive and ZF) is incompatible with the Strong
27 Theory of Relative Identity because the traditional interpretation presupposes
28 that any set contains a number of elements distinguished from one another
29 absolutely.

30 As Cantor puts it, ‘a set is a collection into a whole of definite, distinct
31 elements of our intuition or of our thought’ (as quoted in Fraenkel 1966: 9).
32 And again,

33
34 [A] variety (an aggregate, a set) of elements that belong to a certain
35 conceptual subject is well defined if by virtue of its definition and of
36 the Principle of Excluded Middle it must be determined as *internally*
37 *determined* whether an element of such a conceptual subject is an
38 element of the variety, *so as* if two objects belonging to the set,
39 despite the formal diversity by means of which they are given, are
40 identical or not. (As quoted, E. Casari 1976: 22.)
41

42 It is clear, from this, that some rather radical departure from conventional
43 model-theoretic semantics is required for this project. Perhaps, following Leśniewski,
44 the need for a semantics will be denied, or, less radically, the need for a semantics
45 which assigns values to specific components of propositions. In other words, a
46 Strong Theory of Relative Identity might involve rejecting the principle of com-
47 positionality.

48 There is, of course, support in the contemporary literature for abandon-
49 ing the compositionality principle. However, the arguments that are usually
50 introduced in order undermine the principle will not be of much support for
51 the current project, since these arguments aim to show that something further
52 is needed for a complete semantics beyond interpretations of terms. The cur-
53 rent proposal is that we can have a sufficient understanding of the meanings of
54 propositions without being able, even in theory, to specify non-linguistic items
55 to which the sub-propositional components of language stand in relations of
56 denotation.
57

58 This radical proposal is not obviously incoherent, but the cost seems to be
59 very great indeed, and not one to be accepted lightly. It would be worthwhile,
60 then, to search for a less radical alternative. If the compositionality principle is
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9 true, then the coherence of strong relative identity depends on the possibility of
10 a semantic account of the sub-propositional parts of a language which does not
11 require that the values of the linguistic items be distinguishable in any absolute
12 way, and therefore allows for an absolute identity relation to be defined over the
13 domain.

14 We have seen that this is ruled out in conventional model-theoretic semantics
15 by the very nature of sets. The remaining alternative, then, is to look beyond
16 traditional ZF set theory. Pawel Garbacz (2002: 28) in the course of developing
17 a series of logics for what I have termed weak theories of relative identity, notes
18 in passing that, for a non-classical framework for a corresponding semantics,
19 one might turn to non-classical set theories such as Blizard's Multi-Set The-
20 ory (1989) or Krause's Quasi-Set Theory. Garbacz believes, however, that the
21 prospects are not promising, though he does not elaborate on why he thinks so.

22 It is fairly apparent on reflection that the theory of multi-sets will not be
23 helpful in this regard. The special characteristic of the theory of multi-sets is
24 that multi-sets may contain *the same* elements several times over. In other
25 words, whereas (x, y, y) is just the same ZF set as (x, y) , they are different
26 multi-sets because distinguished by the double occurrence of the element y in
27 one but not the other. Multi-set theory does not abandon the use of absolute
28 identity in distinguishing elements from one another, indeed it seems to require
29 it for the very definition of a multi-set. The upshot is that if a term maps onto
30 a single determinate value, either an element or a multi-set of iterations of given
31 elements, then the denotation of the term will bear an absolute identity relation
32 to itself. Once again, on this account the Godhead cannot but be identical with
33 the Godhead, and non-identical with the persons.

34 However, I do think that Garbacz's judgement in the case of Quasi-Set The-
35 ory is too quick. I think that this theory shows that the strong relative identity
36 theorist could reject ZF Set Theory as the groundwork theory for a semantics in
37 favour of a non-classical set theory which allows for elements without identity
38 conditions. Quasi-Set Theory is a provably consistent non-classical set theory
39 originally developed in Krause's paper 'On a Quasi-Set Theory' (Krause 1992)
40 and subsequently, in more detail, by Krause and Steven French (2006, 2010).
41 The theory of quasi-sets involves sets with elements of two different kinds: one
42 labelled ' M -atoms', objects for which all the traditional laws of logic (including
43 identity) apply. These are no different from the Ur-elements of ZFU Set Theory.
44 The other entities are called ' m -atoms'. As Krause explains,
45
46

47 [t]he atoms of the other kind (m -atoms) may be intuitively thought
48 of as elementary particles of modern physics, and we will suppose,
49 following Schrödinger's ideas, that identity is meaningless with re-
50 spect to them (Schrödinger 1952: 16-68). Then we will admit that
51 the Traditional Theory of identity (TTI) does not apply to the m -
52 atoms. These facts enable us to hold, with regard to the m -atoms,
53 that the concepts of indistinguishability and identity may not be
54 equivalent. Therefore, roughly speaking we can say that a q-set
55 (quasi-set) is a collection of objects (called elements) such that to the
56 elements of one of the species (the m -atoms), the notion of identity
57 (ascribed by classical logic and mathematics) lacks sense. (Krause
58 1992: 402-403)
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60 Therefore, for any m -atom, x , it is not the case that x is absolutely iden-
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tical with x . This means that a quasi-set of m -atoms cannot be thought of as composed of ultimately-fine-grained elements distinguished from one another absolutely. Yet, we can quantify over such items, and make predications of cardinality about q-sets of m -atoms (at least, Krause and French introduce a ‘quasi-cardinality’ into their language which allows them to make such predications). What is the significance of this for the relative identity solution to the logical problem of the Trinity? The problem that we had identified was that, on any semantic account which designates a value for the term ‘the Godhead’ which bears an absolute identity relation to itself and is distinguished from other possible values by negated relations of absolute identity, then, given that in any orthodox theory of the Trinity there are statements of the form ‘ $P(\text{the Godhead}) \wedge \neg P(\text{the Father})$ ’, on pain of contradiction, the Godhead will bear at best a weaker-than-absolute relation of identity to the Father, while simultaneously bearing the more fundamental absolute identity relation to itself. Such a theory would fail to satisfy (Divinity). The Godhead would be divine in virtue of just being the very thing it is, the Persons of the Trinity would be divine in virtue of holding weaker equivalence relations (call them a kind of identity if you want) to the Godhead. The escape offered by a Geachean account is to deny that even the Godhead bears the privileged absolute identity relation to itself. The question facing this account is whether it does not simply collapse into the orthodox theory of identity when the time comes to specify the semantic values of terms. The existence of provably consistent theories of sets which do not presuppose the absolute identity or non-identity of their elements shows us that, contra Quine and Dummett, neither the mere specification of a domain nor quantifying over a domain is on its own sufficient to guarantee that the elements of the sets or the possible assignments of the variables are distinguished from one another absolutely. If there can be sets of m -atoms and if we can quantify over these items, then it is not the case that everything our language is equipped to talk about needs to be (absolutely) self-identical. This, I think, answers what I take to be the major objection to the coherence of relative identity.¹²

I conclude then, that at the cost of adopting the Strong Theory of Relative Identity, a solution to the logical problem of the Trinity can be found which avoids the consequence that the Godhead and the persons of the Trinity are divine in different ways.

5 Conclusion

The upshot of the discussion in section 3 is that the only account of the Trinity in the literature which can preserve orthodoxy and satisfy (Divinity) involves adopting a logic of strong relative identity. That is, a logic in which absolute, universally reflexive, identity does not occur as a primitive and cannot be introduced by definition.

The costs of such a strategy are high. As well as giving up the relation of identity, and in particular giving up Leibniz’s Law, it is also necessary to

¹²The position being argued for in this section is not that the persons of the Trinity are to be thought of as similar to quantum particles, for which q-set theory was designed. I do not entertain the hope of shedding very much light on the metaphysics of the Trinity by making an analogy with quantum phenomena. The point is simply that, with the development of the formal apparatus to deal with sets of non-individuals, we have reason to think that the notions are quantification and a domain of discourse are not inherently tied to absolute identity.

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give up on any semantic account which attaches absolutely individuated values to terms. This means giving up the possibility of genuine singular reference.¹³ However, I have argued that this does not show that the emerging picture is incoherent, because quantification does not necessarily depend on the assignment of determinate values for variables. I conclude that the account can escape the most serious objection that is raised against it.

¹³In Quasi-set theory it is impossible to single out, or name, *m*-atoms (Krause and French 2006: 320), and endorsing what Michael Dummett describes as an ‘amorphous lump’ picture of the fundamental ontology of the universe. This suggests that van Inwagen’s strategy of treating the apparent singular terms of the doctrine of the Trinity as quantified expressions is unavoidable on the relative identity account. However, there is some theological motivation from the literature on Apophaticism.

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