

## **Swinburne's Tritheism**

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There has, in recent years, been increased attention paid by philosophers to the doctrine of the Trinity. Their interest has primarily been not in exploring in any detail the content of the doctrine, but rather in determining whether or not it is coherent. Richard Swinburne, in *The Christian God*, is interested in both issues.<sup>1</sup> He aims to show that the doctrine is coherent in the course of developing an account of its content. I will argue in this paper that his account fails as a characterization of the content of the doctrine of the Trinity because it amounts to Tritheism, and thus fails also as a demonstration of the coherence of Trinitarianism.

Recent philosophical discussion of the Trinity has proceeded by way of addressing the question of whether some set of statements stating the essentials of the doctrine can be shown to be logically consistent. The favored set seems to be the following, extracted from the Athanasian Creed:

- (1) The Father is God.
- (2) The Son is God.
- (3) The Holy Spirit is God.
- (4) The Father is not the Son.
- (5) The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
- (6) The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
- (7) There is exactly one God.

The debate has tended to be over whether or not the resources of logical theory provide a way of showing (1)–(7) to be consistent, despite appearances to the contrary.<sup>2</sup>

Swinburne's strategy is to start, not with an account of the logical structure of (1)–(7), but with a priori considerations concerning the nature of God. He argues that it is, not only coherent to suppose, but necessarily true, that if there are any divine individuals at all, there are no more and no less than three of them; so that, if any God exists at all, he 'is such that inevitably he becomes tripersonal'.<sup>3</sup> He then tries to show that what he has claimed to demonstrate a priori is precisely what the authors of the Christian creeds had in mind in asserting the doctrine of the Trinity. So Swinburne's argument can

be understood as follows: (a) What (Swinburne thinks) can be determined a priori about the 'tripersonal' nature of God is coherent; and (b) This is precisely what Trinitarianism consists in; so (c) Trinitarianism is coherent. I will argue that both (a) and (b) are highly doubtful, so that Swinburne cannot be regarded as having successfully defended (c).

Swinburne defines a divine individual as one who is 'necessarily perfectly free, omniscient, omnipotent, and existing of metaphysical necessity' as well as perfectly good.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that what Swinburne means by 'metaphysical necessity' is not necessarily what other writers who use that expression mean by it. He contrasts it with what he calls 'ontological necessity', and defines these expressions (at some length) in such a way that both statements on the one hand, and events and substances on the other, can be said to be metaphysically or ontologically necessary.<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, we need only consider the senses in which substances can be said to be metaphysically or ontologically necessary. Put as succinctly as possible, Swinburne means, by an ontologically necessary substance  $S_1$ , one that exists everlastingly and is such that 'there is not at any time any cause, either active or permissive, of its everlasting existence'<sup>6</sup>; and by a metaphysically necessary substance  $S_1$ , one that is either an ontologically necessary substance, or a substance that exists everlastingly and has as a cause of its everlasting existence either an active cause  $S_2$  that itself exists everlastingly and brings  $S_1$  about inevitably in virtue of  $S_2$ 's properties, or merely a permissive cause  $S_2$  that permits  $S_1$  to exist inevitably in virtue of  $S_2$ 's properties.<sup>7</sup>

It is metaphysical necessity, rather than ontological necessity, which Swinburne regards as an essential property of divine individuals. This allows for the possibility that 'one divine individual can derive his existence from another divine individual, so long as the derivation is inevitable',<sup>8</sup> that is, so long as it is inevitable that the first divine individual bring about the second, given the properties that the first possesses. Note that this does not, as it might at first appear to, open the way to Arianism, the heresy according to which 'There was a time when he (the Son) was not'; for a metaphysically necessary being, even one that is caused to exist, is still an everlasting one. A divine individual may depend on another for its existence, according to Swinburne, even though there was never a point in time at which neither existed.

Given these properties, Swinburne thinks it inevitable that, if there are any divine individuals at all, there will be three and only three of them. His reasoning is as follows. Suppose there is at least one divine individual. Being perfectly good, he will do whatever moral considerations give him overriding reason to do. Now love, Swinburne says, 'is a supreme good', and he characterizes it further in the following way:

Love involves sharing, giving to another what of one's own is good for him and receiving from the other what of his is good for one; and love involves cooperating with another to benefit third parties. This latter is crucial for worthwhile love. There would be something deeply unsatisfactory (even if for inadequate humans sometimes unavoidable) about a marriage in which the parties were concerned solely with each other and did not use their mutual love to bring forth good to others, for example by begetting, nourishing, and educating children, but possibly in other ways instead. Love must share and love must cooperate in sharing.<sup>9</sup>

A state of affairs in which there is such sharing of love, Swinburne concludes, would be better than one in which there was not. So a divine individual, being perfectly good, would have overriding reason to bring about such a state of affairs, and thus to bring about the existence of another like him, with whom he could share in love. (And it would have to be another *divine* individual presumably because only with such could the first divine individual *fully* share everything, i.e. the divine attributes. 'The best love', Swinburne says, 'would share all that it had'.<sup>10</sup>) Furthermore, given that love expressed by two individuals in cooperating for the sake of a third is superior to that shared by two individuals alone, the first and second divine individuals would have overriding reason to bring about the existence of a third divine individual. (And again, it would have to be a *divine* individual for the love of the first and second individuals fully to be shared with it.) We have, then, three divine individuals, each of whom exists of metaphysical necessity if any exists at all: The first has no active cause, but does have as two permissive causes the second and third individuals, and they permit him to exist inevitably in virtue of their properties (e.g., their perfect goodness); the second and third do have active causes (the first being the active cause of the second, the first and second being the active causes of the third), and these active causes bring them about inevitably in virtue of their properties (e.g., their perfect goodness); and all three exist everlastingly.

Why would the process not continue, so that further divine individuals would be brought about? Swinburne says:

My ethical intuitions are inevitably highly fallible here, but it seems to me that cooperating with two others in sharing [by bringing about a fourth divine individual] is not essential to the manifestation of love so long as cooperation with one in sharing [by bringing about a third divine individual] is going on. There is a qualitative difference between sharing and cooperating in sharing and hence overriding reason for divine acts of both kinds; but, as it seems to me, no similar qualitative difference between cooperating with one in sharing and cooperating with two.<sup>11</sup>

So there would be no moral requirement that the three (perfectly good) divine individuals would have to meet by bringing about a fourth divine individual, and so no overriding reason for them to bring one about. And if there is no overriding reason to bring about a fourth divine individual, there could not be a fourth divine individual. For even if the three existing divine individuals decided to bring about a fourth individual in some respects like them, despite the fact that they would not be morally required to do so, it wouldn't (and couldn't) be a metaphysically necessary individual, because it would not have come about *inevitably* in virtue of the properties of the three divine individuals. But then it just wouldn't (and couldn't) be a *divine* individual: Such an individual 'might (metaphysically) not have existed, and so could not be divine'.<sup>12</sup>

With this argument, Swinburne claims to have shown a priori that 'necessarily if there is at least one divine individual, and if it is logically possible that there be more than one divine individual, then there are three and only three divine individuals'.<sup>13</sup> But he has not, I think, quite shown this at all. First of all, what he can, at best, claim to have shown is, not that if there are any divine individuals at all, there are three and only three, but only that if there is just one divine individual at first, in some non-temporal sense of 'at first' that fits in with Swinburne's non-temporal sense of 'bringing about' (if we grant the meaningfulness of this sort of talk at all), then that divine individual will inevitably bring about two, and only two, further such individuals. But this does not at all rule out the possibility that there just are, in the first place, any number of divine individuals, who exist of metaphysical necessity. It *could*, for all Swinburne has said, turn out that there 'already' are three, or three thousand, divine individuals who exist without being actively brought about by any other such beings, but who permit each other to exist inevitably in virtue of their properties (i.e., because it is morally required that they permit this). (And in this case, presumably, no further divine individuals, a three thousand and first, say, could actively be brought about because there would be no overriding need to do so. For there would already be, for each divine individual, others to 'share in love' with.)<sup>14</sup>

Now Swinburne might be able to grant this point without undermining his overall project. He could acknowledge that he hasn't, after all, shown that there *couldn't* be more than three divine individuals, but only that, if we are willing to grant the existence of one such individual, we must grant the existence of two more as well. And he would then presumably argue that the inductive arguments which he elsewhere argues make it probable that there is a God<sup>15</sup> warrant only the conclusion that there is one such being.<sup>16</sup> So his overall argument could be reformulated as follows: Inductive considerations by themselves warrant only the conclusion that there is one divine individual;

but a priori considerations show that, if there is at least one divine individual, there are three of them; so our overall evidence warrants only the conclusion that there are three divine individuals.<sup>17</sup>

Still, Swinburne's argument has, in my view, other, more serious problems than this one. For it rests on what can only be described as rather tendentious moral intuitions. Why should we accept Swinburne's claim that the states of affairs involving one individual sharing with another, and two individuals sharing with a third, but not the state of affairs where three individuals share with a fourth, are states of affairs a divine individual has a moral obligation to bring about? Swinburne appeals to the analogies of marriage and family to argue for the moral necessity of bringing about the first two states of affairs, but it is easy to see how they would also support the moral necessity of bringing about the third. One could argue as follows: 'We know from human experience that a child who has no siblings often feels that his family life is less fulfilling than that of children who do have siblings; so a state of affairs in which love is shared between four individuals is better than that in which it is shared between three. So a perfectly good divine individual, since he is obligated to bring about the best state of affairs possible, must bring about three other divine individuals. In fact, since very large families (including as many as ten children) are often the happiest, perhaps we should conclude that there must be, after all, eleven or twelve divine beings'. I do not claim that such an argument would be very convincing. But it is not obvious that it would be any weaker than Swinburne's argument. Swinburne's intuitions are, I think, far too dubious to support the massive metaphysical weight he wants to rest on them.<sup>18</sup>

But, even apart from these worries, we might also ask: *Is* it logically possible that there exists more than one divine individual in the first place? Can it even coherently be supposed that there is? One reason for thinking not is that it is arguable that there could not be more than one omnipotent individual, for if there were two or more allegedly omnipotent individuals, they could conceivably frustrate one another's actions, in which case they just wouldn't truly be omnipotent at all (since an agent whose actions can be frustrated is by definition not omnipotent). Swinburne considers this objection, and thinks that he can get around it.<sup>19</sup> He suggests first that, since the two or more omnipotent divine beings would also be perfectly good, there would be a large range of actions concerning which they could not possibly conflict. Each will recognize a certain range of actions as morally required, and a certain other range of actions as morally prohibited, and thus will agree on the need to perform or refrain from such actions. But what about acts that are neither morally required or morally prohibited, but which a divine individual may choose to do or not do as he wishes? What if one divine individual decides

to do one such act while another divine individual simultaneously decides to do another such act which is incompatible with the first? Swinburne says that such circumstances will be avoided by means of adherence to a set of rules for action that allot to each divine individual a separate sphere of activity. Such a set of rules will be determined for a divine individual by the divine individual or individuals responsible for bringing him about, and he will agree to abide by them, Swinburne says, because his being dependent on the author or authors of those rules for his own existence obliges him to abide by them.

Here too, though, Swinburne's argument rests on highly controversial moral intuitions. Why should we suppose that the mere fact that one divine individual is responsible for bringing another about obliges the latter to adhere to the plan of action set by the former? To appeal again to human analogies, which are, after all, all we (and Swinburne) have to go on, we can certainly think of cases where one is dependent on another for his power or even his existence, but in which this fact does not oblige the former to abide by even the morally unproblematic demands of the latter. Children, beyond a certain age at any rate, are surely not morally obliged to go along with even reasonable plans that their parents make for them. So it is not at all clear that dependent divine individuals would be morally obliged to go along with the plans of action set by those divine individuals responsible for bringing them about. And since only such a moral obligation would ensure that there would be a mechanism to prevent conflicts of action of the sort noted above, it is not at all clear that such conflicts could be avoided. So it is not at all clear that there could be more than one omnipotent being, and therefore not at all clear that there could be more than one divine individual.<sup>20</sup>

It is, then, at least questionable whether there could possibly be more than one divine individual. And even if there could be, Swinburne's argument for there being at least and at most three such individuals, if there are any at all, is extremely weak. But suppose Swinburne's account, as developed so far, was flawless, so that it successfully showed that the claim that there are three and only three divine individuals (if there are any at all) is, not only coherent, but necessarily true. How would this help to show that Trinitarianism is coherent? For Swinburne's account, at first glance, surely amounts to Tritheism, the heretical claim that there are three gods, not to Trinitarianism. And if it does, not only would it not help the Trinitarian, it would decisively refute him. For if, necessarily, there are three gods if there are any at all, then the Trinitarian's claim that there is exactly one God is false, and necessarily so!

Swinburne, however, would obviously deny that he is committed to Tritheism, since he claims that his account is precisely what Trinitarianism amounts to.<sup>21</sup> How does he justify this claim? Consider again the Trinitarian sentences (1)–(7), extracted from the Athanasian Creed. Swinburne claims that (1)–(3)

assert that each of the Divine Persons is a divine individual in his sense, and that (4)–(6) assert that they are distinct divine individuals; but he says that (7) does *not* assert that there is only one divine individual (p. 180). The expression “God” must mean something different in (7) from what it means in (1)–(3), he argues; for if it does not, the authors of the Creed would have been asserting a manifest contradiction, and this, he says, is not a plausible supposition.<sup>22</sup> In asserting (7), Swinburne says, ‘I suggest that they were denying that there were three *independent* divine beings, any of which could exist without the other; or which could act independently of each other’.<sup>23</sup> What (7) asserts, then, according to Swinburne, is the existence of a single collective of divine individuals who are causally interdependent and unified in their courses of action in the ways we have seen his account entails.

Swinburne appeals to linguistic considerations to support his reading of the creeds as at least one possible, if not the only possible, reading.<sup>24</sup> I do not claim the competence necessary to evaluate those considerations. But even if his reading is possible, his claim that it is in fact the correct one cannot, I think, be sustained. Behind credal statements like (7), of course, lie scriptural passages such as ‘I am the Lord and there is no other; there is no God besides Me’ (Isaiah 45: 5) (to take just one example). Few (if any) would argue that such passages can plausibly be taken to express what Swinburne says (7) expresses. (Imagine a Jewish reader of this Old Testament passage trying to see in it an affirmation of Swinburne’s collective of divine individuals!) So insofar as credal statements like (7) are intended to reflect such scriptural affirmations (and no one disputes that they are so intended), Swinburne’s reading of them is highly implausible.

Furthermore, other credal statements themselves tell against Swinburne’s interpretation. The Athanasian Creed states: ‘So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet there are not three Almighties, but one Almighty’.<sup>25</sup> This passage indicates that affirming the existence of just one Almighty is part of what the creed is affirming in (7). But surely this passage (and thus (7)) conflicts with Swinburne’s description of his three divine individuals, each of whom is said individually to be omnipotent: ‘It is they, . . . rather than [the collective as a whole], who, to speak strictly, would have the divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.; though clearly there is a ready and natural sense in which the collective can be said to have them as well’.<sup>26</sup> For if there are three distinct omnipotent individuals, then there *are* three ‘Almighties’.

Finally, the very facts that there have been centuries of controversy regarding the coherence of Trinitarianism, and that many have been tempted even to revise standard logical doctrines in order to settle the controversy, themselves tell against Swinburne’s claim that his construal of the creeds is correct. For

on his construal, the logical consistency of (1)–(7) is obvious. What, then, has all the fuss been about? Have Davis, Martinich, van Inwagen, Cartwright, Macnamara et al. (all cited in note 2) and many others all been committing an embarrassingly colossal blunder in even thinking that there was any question as to whether Trinitarianism is coherent? That is hard to believe. Yet they must have been if Swinburne is right. Of course, it could be that he *is* right, and that all those authors (many of whom are themselves Trinitarians) who have supposed that the correct reading of the creeds raises questions about the coherence of Trinitarianism are just mistaken. But this does not seem likely, and to convince us of his position, Swinburne would surely have to present detailed historical, philological, and theological arguments that go well beyond the few remarks he makes in defense of it in *The Christian God*. As to Swinburne's claim that the only other possible reading of the creeds entails a contradiction, I presume that most of the writers just mentioned would disagree with it. Whether it is true or not, I leave to the reader to decide.

We see, then, that Swinburne's account fails, not only as an attempt to demonstrate the coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity, but even as an attempt to state the content of the doctrine. For if Swinburne's a priori arguments concerning the nature of God were convincing, they would, it turns out, constitute a strong case for Tritheism, and thereby serve to *undermine* Trinitarianism. This is, no doubt, not a result Swinburne would be comfortable with. It is, then, perhaps fortunate for him that those arguments are not convincing.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

1. Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
2. See Richard Cartwright, 'On the logical problem of the Trinity', in his *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); S.T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); E. Feser, 'Has Trinitarianism been shown to be coherent?', *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997); John Macnamara, Marie La Palme Reyes, and Gonzalo E. Reyes, 'Logic and the Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994); A.P. Martinich, 'Identity and Trinity', *The Journal of Religion* 58 (1979); Peter van Inwagen, 'And yet They are not Three Gods but One God', in T.V. Morris (ed.), *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
3. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 191.
4. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 171.
5. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 118–119.
6. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 118–119.
7. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 119. It should be noted that Swinburne's explication of these notions is much more complex than my summary of his views might indicate, and he works a number of other details into his definitions, such as the possibility of causes which are themselves uncaused and have no beginnings but which later go out of existence. But these details have no bearing on the arguments that follow, so I have omitted them.

8. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 173.
9. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 177–178.
10. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 178.
11. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 179.
12. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 179.
13. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 179.
14. An anonymous referee has objected that ‘whereas Swinburne specifies the essential properties of divine individuals that he takes to require the existence of just three’, my suggestion that there may, for all Swinburne has said, exist three thousand divine individuals ‘gives no hint as to what divine properties would require each of the 3000 divine individuals to permit the existence of the others. Therefore the suggestion lacks cogency’. I’m not sure I understand the objection. If the claim is that Swinburne has already shown why there couldn’t be three thousand divine individuals, then it misses the point. For my point is just that the most Swinburne has shown is that if we ‘start’ with a single divine individual, then we can’t get any farther than two more. What he hasn’t shown is why we can’t just ‘start’ with, say, three thousand of them in the first place. If the objection is rather that there are no divine properties that would require each of the imagined three thousand divine individuals to permit all of the others to continue to exist (while there are divine properties that would ensure the continued existence of three and only three), my response is that Swinburne has already told us which property would require this: perfect goodness. For though if there just were, to ‘start’ with, three thousand divine individuals, perfect goodness would not require the bringing into existence of a three thousand and first, it surely would require that each of the three thousand that already exist permit each of the others to continue to exist (just as, on Swinburne’s scenario, perfect goodness requires that the second and third divine individuals permit the continued existence of the first, etc.).
15. See Swinburne’s *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).
16. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 173.
17. This solution may, however, open Swinburne’s account up to a theological objection. For if it is even *possible* that there exists a divine individual or individuals outside the collective of three divine individuals which Swinburne identifies with the Trinity, this would arguably detract from God’s uniqueness (and thus from his greatness).
18. An anonymous referee has objected that the analogies appealed to here and in what follows ‘would seem to depend on specific features of human social life that would not carry over to divine beings’. But the analogies I appeal to are of just the same sort that Swinburne appeals to. So if we reject the former, we must reject the latter as well, in which case Swinburne’s argument cannot even get off the ground. But if we accept Swinburne’s analogies, my point is that he has given us no reason not to accept the ones I have appealed to as well, with all of their unwelcome implications. Of course, it might be argued that Trinitarianism itself supports the use of some analogies (e.g. that of a marriage that produces a single child) but not others (e.g. that of a marriage producing many children) when speaking of divine beings; but to appeal to Trinitarianism to get around my objection would simply be question-begging.
19. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 171–176.
20. C. Anthony Anderson has suggested to me that the objection under consideration here isn’t really a serious one in the first place, so that Swinburne’s response to it is not only unsatisfactory, but unnecessary. For to suggest that an omnipotent individual’s actions might be frustrated, he says, is like suggesting that an omnipotent individual may create a stone that is too heavy for him to lift. Most philosophers and theologians would hold that the correct response to the latter suggestion (‘the paradox of the stone’) is just to argue that there could not be such a stone, for the description of such a stone (‘a stone which an omnipotent being could not lift’) is simply incoherent; and since omnipotence does not involve the ability to bring about the logically impossible, even an omnipotent individual could not create such a stone. (See Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), pp. 73–76 for discussion of this issue.) Similarly, Anderson

says, there simply could not be a (logically possible) action an omnipotent individual is frustrated in performing. So the suggestion that two omnipotent individuals might frustrate one another's actions is incoherent.

It seems to me, though, that the two cases are not quite analogous. The paradox of the stone is intended to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the notion of omnipotence, and the argument can be stated in the form of a dilemma: 'Suppose there is an omnipotent being. Can he create a stone that is too heavy for him to lift? If he can, there is something he cannot do, namely lift the stone in question, so that he is not omnipotent. If he can't, then there is something he cannot do, namely create the stone, so that he is not omnipotent. Either way, he is not omnipotent. So there could not be an omnipotent being'. The problem with this argument, as we have seen, is that it depends on the idea that omnipotence involves the ability to do the logically impossible. But there is no analogous problem with a *reductio* argument against the possibility of more than one omnipotent individual, which can be stated as follows: 'Suppose there are two omnipotent individuals A and B. Now (using Swinburne's example, *The Christian God*, p. 172) suppose A desires to send Abraham to Iraq at time t and that B desires to send Abraham to Iran at time t. Since A is omnipotent, he can bring it about that Abraham is in Iraq at t; and since B is omnipotent, he can bring it about that Abraham is in Iran at t. It follows, then, that Abraham can be in both Iraq and Iran at time t. But this is impossible. So there cannot be two omnipotent individuals'. This argument, unlike that concerning the paradox of the stone, does not depend on the idea that an omnipotent being can do the logically impossible. So, contrary to Anderson, there seems no reason to doubt that it constitutes a genuine difficulty for Swinburne's position, one which, as we have seen, he fails adequately to deal with.

21. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 180.
22. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 180.
23. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 180.
24. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 181–182.
25. Quoted, along with much of the rest of the creed, by Swinburne in *The Christian God*, p. 186.
26. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 181.
27. I thank C. Anthony Anderson, J. William Forgie, and an anonymous referee for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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