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Objections to Social Trinitarianism

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Abstract: **This article reviews a number of objections to Social Trinitarianism that have been presented in the recent literature, especially objections alleging that Social Trinitarianism is not truly monotheistic. A number of the objections are found to be successful so far as they go, but they apply only to some versions of Social Trinitarianism and not to all. Objections to Social Trinitarianism as such, on the other hand, are not successful. The article concludes with a proposal for a Social Trinitarian conception of the unity of God.**

The current debate over the doctrine of the Trinity presents itself as a contest between Latin Trinitarianism, inspired by Augustine and Aquinas, and Social Trinitarianism, which is indebted to the Cappodocians. The challenge for Latin Trinitarianism is to avoid modalism, whereas Social Trinitarianism is pressed to show that it does not amount to tritheism. As various writers have pointed out, the terms of this debate can and perhaps should be challenged.[1] For the purposes of the present paper, however, they will be accepted as a starting point. Our topic will be to examine and assess critically the major objections that have been raised against Social Trinitarianism.

But how is Social Trinitarianism to be understood? According to one critic, Dale Tuggy, this view maintains that 'God contains three distinct minds, centres of consciousness, wills, or thinking things.' On ST, as he understands it, 'God' names, not an individual, but 'a mere group of individuals'.[2] So we have two distinct claims, a claim about the nature of the Trinitarian Persons, and also a claim about the sort of unity that obtains between the Persons, that of 'a mere group of individuals'. And this means that there are, in principle, two ways in which the view can be criticized: one might object either that the understanding of the nature of the Persons is deficient, or that the kind of unity postulated between the Persons is defective and inadequate. Note that these two sorts of criticisms, while not unrelated, are in principle independent of each other.

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One might find the understanding of the nature of the Persons inadequate independently of the mode of unity postulated for them, and, on the other hand, one might object to the conception of divine unity without thereby questioning the nature of the Persons. Or, of course, one might present a single objection that strikes at both aspects of the view at once.

In what follows we will encounter objections of all these types. An interesting pattern emerges as we survey the different criticisms: opponents of Social Trinitarianism have had comparatively less to say by way of direct criticism of the conception of the divine Persons held by that view; most of their effort has gone into criticizing ST's conception of divine unity. On the other hand, as we look at the writings of the Social Trinitarians themselves, an opposite pattern appears: there is a much stronger attachment to ST's conception of the Persons than to any particular solution to the problem of their unity. What can be made of these patterns remains to be seen.

Since in philosophy clarity is to be preferred to dramatic suspense, I begin by stating the conclusion that will be reached. I believe that the objections fail to refute Social Trinitarianism properly understood, but they do raise important questions about it and they succeed in showing that some of the moves that have been made by defenders of the view are unwise and unacceptable. I will conclude by presenting (tentatively) what I hope will be a more successful model for the divine unity.

Why the Trinitarian Persons are not Persons

We begin with objections that pertain specifically to the nature of the Trinitarian Persons, as conceived by ST.[3] But what is the nature of the Persons, as ST conceives it? Put simply, the Persons are persons. That is to say, they are individual centres of consciousness and will, capable of entering into personal relationships both with one another and with created persons. Clearly not all of the sorts of differences that obtain between created persons will exist among the Trinitarian Persons; details concerning this can be left to one side for the present. What is absolutely crucial, however, is the capacity of the divine Persons to love and commune with one another; this, one might say, is what Social Trinitarianism is most fundamentally about.[4]

As has already been noted, objections directed specifically to this understanding of the Persons are not especially plentiful. The mere assertion that Social Trinitarianism amounts to tritheism does not, of course, constitute an objection; it is rather a simple statement of disagreement. Only slightly more pertinent is the oft-repeated assertion that the ancients did not have our psychological conception of personality, and that on account of this their terms *hypostasis, prosospon,* and *persona* should not be equated with our 'person'.[5] It is quite true that they did not have the developed interest in psychology that is typical today

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(which is not to say that they did not, on occasion, demonstrate keen psychological insight). However, they certainly were not without the concept of *personal agency*, a concept without which human life would be greatly impoverished. What is needed, then, is to *look and see* whether or not the Church Fathers, and for that matter the biblical authors, spoke in ways that imply the attribution of personal agency to the Trinitarian Persons.

There do exist, however, some better-developed objections. Daniel Howard-Snyder, for instance, insists that the concept of a person must be applied to God taken as a unity rather than to the Persons. Commenting on the 'Trinity monotheism' of J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig,[6] Howard-Snyder observes that, on their view,

> God has three persons as proper parts, but God, the Trinity 'as a whole,' is not a person. Strictly speaking, using personal pronouns to refer to God presupposes, on their view, the *false* proposition that God is a person. And here I do not mean by 'person' anything distinctively modern or Cartesian or anything else (allegedly) objectionable. I have in mind the concept of whatever is, strictly and literally, the referent of a personal pronoun. Even in that minimalist sense of 'person,' the suggestion that the Christian God is not a person is most unusual, to say the least.[7]

To be sure, the fact that an assertion is 'unusual' is not, taken by itself, a terribly strong argument against it. And the assertion in question may not in fact be all that unusual: there are, after all, quite a few Social Trinitarians around, and they are likely, if they are clear-headed, to be saying something very similar to what Moreland and Craig say on this topic. However, Howard-Snyder does say more later on in support of his objection:

> First, recall the opening words of Genesis: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' Creation is an intentional act. An intentional act cannot be performed by anything but a person. God is not a person, say Moreland and Craig. Thus, if they are right, God did not create the heavens and the earth; indeed, He could not have done so. The first sentence of the Bible expresses a necessary falsehood. Not a good start![8]

Howard-Snyder considers the possible response that 'a composite can ''borrow'' properties from its proper parts'; he replies that 'there can be no ''lending'' of a property unless the borrower is antecedently the sort of thing that can have it'. Thus, if we are in fact immaterial souls (as many dualists insist), 'it is strictly and literally *false* that if my arm is bleeding, I am bleeding'.[9]

There is something very strange about this objection. Howard-Snyder summarily rules out of court, in this instance, the extremely widespread usage according to which groups of agents (including groups vastly less unified than the Holy Trinity) are said to perform intentional acts in virtue of such acts being performed by their members. No, the assertion that God – on a Christian view, the Holy Trinity – created the heavens and the earth is *false* unless the Trinity is, simply and literally, a single person. This insistence on univocal language flies in

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the face of virtually the entire theological tradition, which has insisted that *analogical* language is very much to be expected in our assertions concerning the divine; indeed, that it is indispensable.[10] But not only that: it is also widely recognized that in the doctrine of the Trinity, *more than* in many other areas of theology, our verbal and conceptual resources are stretched to the limit. On account of this it is here, even more than elsewhere, that analogical uses of language – such as, for example, the attribution of personal actions to the Trinity as a whole – are very much to be expected. Howard-Snyder's disregard of this virtually unanimous tradition is breath-taking.[11]

A different, and quite unusual, line of criticism comes from Dale Tuggy.[12] If God is a Social Trinity, Tuggy asserts, then God has been guilty of deceiving us. In particular, He – or rather, *They* – have deceived the believers of the Old and New Testaments, by telling them and otherwise leading them to believe that they were relating to a single individual, when in reality it is a trio of persons to whom they were related in love, worship, and obedience. 'Yahweh', in fact, is revealed as being a *fictional character,* invented because it would (allegedly) have been too difficult to explain the truth about the Trinity either to the ancient Israelites or to the early Christians. Tuggy goes so far as to compare the situation to one in which a woman, supposing herself to be happily married to one man, finds that her 'husband' is really a set of identical triplets, taking turns in the marriage relationship with her! God, of course, could not possibly be guilty of such a heinous deception, from which Tuggy infers that God is not the Social Trinity.

There is a lot that could be said about this criticism, some of which I have tried to say on another occasion.[13] Like Howard-Snyder, Tuggy strongly resists the possibility that his objection could be met by an appeal to analogical language and progressive revelation. But without going into all that in detail, a simple reply suggests itself. Tuggy's objection depends entirely on the assumption that the Trinitarian, reading the references in scripture to 'Yahweh', 'God', or (in the New Testament) 'the Father', should interpret them as references to the entire Trinity. Now this has, in fact, sometimes been said, and, given the presence in one's thinking of a developed Trinitarian theology, it is not entirely without plausibility. Nevertheless, there is little or nothing in the texts themselves to suggest such a reading.

What we have, rather, is Jesus' references to the God of Israel as his Father – and also as our Father (for instance, in the Lord's Prayer). As Tuggy himself points out, 'One searches the New Testament in vain for any representation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as collectively constituting the group called ''God''.'[14] Nor, of course, are such passages to be found in the Old Testament. What we do have in the Hebrew scriptures is innumerable references to 'Yahweh', or 'Elohim', or to God referred to in various other ways. We also have references to the 'Spirit of God', viewed as a power sent forth from God to accomplish various purposes, notably that of empowering the prophets to

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proclaim God's message. The Spirit is not clearly seen as a personal being, but many New Testament texts do not clearly portray the Spirit as personal either.

Then there are the numerous texts referring to the Messiah, God's anointed king, or to the 'Suffering Servant' in Isaiah, or to the 'Son of Man' in Daniel. So we have, if you please, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the assumption that 'Yahweh', 'God', and 'the Father' refer to all three together is seen to be quite unnecessary. To be sure, Son and Spirit are not portrayed in the Old Testament as Trinitarian Persons. The understandings that led eventually to this view of the Three begin to appear in some of the New Testament writings, and the doctrine itself was given its definitive form at some time in the fourth century. This delay, however, is not in any sense an embarrassment; it is readily accounted for by a reasonable approach involving progressive revelation and the development of doctrine.[15] I conclude that Tuggy's 'divine-deception' argument is without force.

Why ST is not monotheistic

We move on to arguments criticizing the kind of unity ascribed to the Trinity by Social Trinitarians. By far the most thorough critique on this point is provided by Brian Leftow, who proposes to argue that 'ST cannot be both orthodox and a version of monotheism'.[16] In order to do this, he surveys various strategies by which Social Trinitarians attempt to vindicate their view as monotheistic. He classifies these strategies in three categories: Trinity monotheism, group-mind monotheism, and functional monotheism. We will address them in reverse order.

Functional monotheism

Social Trinitarians emphasize the importance for monotheism of the fact that the divine rulers of the universe are *functionally unified* – that they exercise an undivided rule over the world and its creatures, such that they are never in conflict with one another and worshippers never need be in doubt as to which of the divine rulers they should be trying to please. Richard Swinburne, arguing that his view of the Trinity is monotheistic, says that:

> On the account which I have given, the three divine individuals taken together would form a collective source of the being of all other things; the members would be totally mutually dependent and necessarily jointly behind each other's acts. This collective would be indivisible in its being for logical reasons – that is, the kind of being that it would be is such that each of its members is necessarily everlasting, and would not have existed unless it had brought about or been brought about by the others. The collective would also be indivisible in its causal action in the sense that each would back totally the causal action of the others. The collective would be causeless and so … unlike its members, ontologically necessary and not dependent for its existence on anything

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> outside itself. … [T]his very strong unity of the collective would make it, as well as its individual members, an appropriate object of worship. The claim that 'there is only one God' is to be read as the claim that the source of being of all other things has to it this kind of indivisible unity.[17]

An unsympathetic critic might put it like this: according to functional monotheism, what is most important is not *how many* divine beings there are, but how well they get along with each other. If the gods are at war with each other that is bad, but a co-operative plurality of divine beings – according to an earlier article of Swinburne's, a plurality of 'Gods'[18] – is not a problem.[19]

Leftow argues against this at some length. Historically, the question as to *how many* divine beings there are has been central to the debate over monotheism. Leftow points out that we could imagine the gods of Olympus being redescribed along the lines laid down by Swinburne. The result might be a more harmonious 'family' of gods (though no doubt one that would be less interesting to read about!), but hardly anything that would qualify as monotheism. If three divine beings is not too many for monotheism, why shouldn't there be 30, or 3,000? It seems to me that Leftow is in the right in holding that functional unity is not enough. A Social Trinitarian will certainly want to insist that the Trinity is 'functionally unified', but this by itself is insufficient to qualify the view as monotheistic. To be sure, there is also the metaphysical unity of the Persons as described by Swinburne, who clearly is not *merely* a functional monotheist. But we need to look beyond functional monotheism if we are to classify Social Trinitarianism as monotheistic.

Group-mind monotheism

A second strategy for showing Social Trinitarianism to be monotheistic is to see the Trinity as some kind of 'group mind'.[20] According to Leftow, a group mind is a 'mind composed of other minds'. One might be inclined to dismiss this idea as incoherent and impossible, but Leftow concedes its possibility, citing in support some much discussed phenomena from brain science. The phenomena in question arise from the operation of commissurotomy, performed in certain severe cases of epilepsy. In this operation the connections between the two cerebral hemispheres are surgically cut; under some circumstances this apparently results in two distinct centres of consciousness in the two hemispheres.[21] These phenomena have led to a further conjecture: perhaps all of us really have distinct sub-minds all the time, each sub-mind sustained by one of the cerebral hemispheres, only these sub-minds are so tightly linked and coordinated by the constant exchange of information through the cerebral commissures that the distinction between the minds is not apparent. In this way it could be that all of us are really 'group minds'.

As we seek to apply the idea of a group mind to the Trinity, several possibilities emerge. One is suggested by the interpretation of 'normal' human minds in the

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previous paragraph: the Persons of the Trinity are individual minds but, like our own cerebral hemispheres in normal function, they are subsumed into the one 'group mind', which is God. This, however, is most unpromising for Social Trinitarianism, for it eliminates the distinct functioning of the Persons that is crucial for that view. One would be hard put to make sense of the notion that the cerebral hemispheres love and commune with one another!

A second possibility is that the Trinitarian Persons retain their own distinct functions of consciousness, knowledge, and will, but that their combined functioning somehow gives rise to a 'higher-level' mind which in some way instantiates the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. This notion, however, raises some extremely unwelcome theological questions. Are we not here speaking of some sort of Holy Quaternity, consisting of Father, Son, Spirit, and – (perhaps) 'God'? When we pray, should we pray to the Father (which has always been standard Christian practice), or should we go 'straight to the top' and address our prayers to the super-mind, namely God? It is evident that such thoughts as these have no claim to Trinitarian orthodoxy, and it is hard to see that they have much of anything else to recommend them.[22]

A third possibility[23] is suggested by some thoughts of C. J. F. Williams, who seems to say that, while no literal 'fourth mind' emerges from the Three (there is no Holy Quaternity), the Three may function in such a tight unity that there is literally but one set of mental states between them. According to Williams, Father, Son, and Spirit,

> … will the same thing with the same will (and) act in one in the same act … the wills of the divine Persons are … a unanimity which is actually a unity … the will of the lover and the beloved coincide so completely that there is a single act of willing.[24]

If we take this literally, as Leftow does, it is at best extremely puzzling. If there is, literally, only one set of mental states between the three Persons, one wonders what the point is of their being three rather than one to begin with. There is also a puzzle, noted by Leftow, about *first-person* mental states:

> If three minds shared one such state – say, a tokening of 'I am' – to whom or what does its 'I' refer? … For Williams, the Persons, not the Trinity, do the tokening. The Trinity is not identical with any one Person. So no Person's I' can refer to the Trinity. … But if the Persons have just one mental state among them it is unclear how any one Person could refer just to himself. … [D]id the whole Trinity will, 'the Son shall become incarnate'? The Son could not learn from that that *he* would become incarnate unless he could also think to himself, in effect, 'I am the Son, so *I* shall become incarnate'. But on Williams's account it is hard to see how the Son could do so.[25]

Interpreted this way, there is little to commend this possibility. I suggest, however, that Williams's own words invite, and indeed require, a less literal interpretation. '[T]he will of the lover and the beloved coincide so completely that there is a single act of willing.' We can understand this to mean that both lover and beloved will, with undivided unanimity, that each shall love the other.

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But despite the talk about a 'single act of willing', the lovers do not thereby lose the use of the personal pronouns! She wills both that '*He* shall love *me*' and that '*I* shall love *him*', and she may be entirely clear about the reference of each of the pronouns in question. Interpreted in this way, Williams's proposal is not so absurd as Leftow makes it seem. But then, neither is it, strictly speaking, an instance of group-mind Trinitarianism.

In fact, Leftow's reading of Williams is seriously misguided. Just two pages before the passage quoted by Leftow, Williams writes,

> [T]he love of the Father is distinct from the love of the Son, and both from that of the Holy Ghost. If there were no distinction, the joy of sharing would be absent. Where there is no *meum* and *tuum*, there is no giving. We must not admit any confusion of the divine Persons.[26]

And on the same page from which Leftow quotes, Williams twice refers to *operationes ad extra,* alluding to the classic saying, *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* (the external works of the Trinity are undivided). In this way he signals that the 'unanimity which is actually a unity' there described pertains primarily to the relations of the Trinity to the created world, not to the relations of the Persons with each other.

I believe that Williams's approach to this topic should be seen as an expression of the idea, common to classical Trinitarians such as Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, that the Persons of the Trinity have 'one will' between them – one will, not in the sense of a single *act* of will (the view that Leftow rightly criticizes) but in the sense of a single *content and purpose* in their willing.[27] This, I submit, is far superior to the idea proposed by Swinburne (and described in the next section) that there is a set of rules, laid down by one of the Trinitarian Persons, which delimit the spheres of operation of the Persons and prevent conflict from arising between them.

Trinity monotheism

The third strategy discussed by Leftow (actually the first in his ordering) is Trinity monotheism. He takes his clue from a remark of Leonard Hodgson concerning the way the early Christian Church thought about God: 'What was needed was that into the place hitherto held in men's thought by the one God … should be put *the Trinity as a whole.*'[28] In developed Trinitarian thinking, then, according to Hodgson, 'the one God = the Trinity'. The motivation for Trinity monotheism is stated concisely by Moreland and Craig, who characterize this view as holding that 'the Trinity alone is God and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while divine, are not Gods'.[29]

Now, taken as it stands, it is hard to see how any Trinitarian could possibly object to Hodgson's assertion. Is the Holy Trinity *not* the one and only God? Is the one God someone, or something, *other than* the Trinity of Father, Son, and

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Spirit? It seems self-evident that any Trinitarian must answer both of these questions in the way implied by Hodgson's statement. However, the versions of Trinity monotheism surveyed by Leftow add an additional twist to Hodgson's affirmation. Several of the authors cited by Leftow take the position that the members of the Trinity, considered singly, do *not* possess all of the standard divine attributes – in effect, that each of Father, Son, and Spirit is *not* in himself fully God. The Persons qualify as 'God' only in virtue of their membership in the Trinity, which alone is God in the full and complete sense. Thus, both C. Stephen Layman and Keith Yandell suggest, according to Leftow, that 'no Person is omnipotent, so that only jointly does their power ''add up'' to omnipotence'.[30] Leftow summarizes David Brown as holding that 'the Trinity has a greater degree of what makes an item divine than anything else. While each Person has a *sort* of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection, only the Trinity as a whole has the highest sort.'[31]

The point of such manoeuvres is clear: if only the Trinity is God in the fullest sense, this underscores the claim that there is just *one* God and serves to deflect the charge of tritheism. But the cost of the solution is very high. According to the Athanasian Creed, 'the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.' This statement may be puzzling, but there is certainly no suggestion that the Persons are 'God' in some lesser sense than the 'one God'. To be sure, some Social Trinitarians reject the Athanasian Creed (which, unlike the Nicene Creed, was not the deliverance of an ecumenical council) as being overly influenced by Latin Trinitarianism. But the Nicene Creed begins with the affirmation, 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty'. Here it is out of the question to suppose that the godhood ascribed to the Father is of a secondary or subordinate sort. And if we accept that Father, Son, and Spirit are all *equally* divine (which is precisely the point of saying that Father and Son are *homoousios*) the notion that the Persons individually have only some secondary sort of deity is ruled out conclusively. Somewhat harshly, yet not without point, Leftow characterizes views that affirm this as 'Arianism'.

Beyond this, there are serious difficulties in spelling out the ways in which the Persons individually might possess the divine attributes in some lesser sense than the Trinity as a whole. Take omniscience, for example. Here the thought is that there may be 'first-person knowledge' which is unique to each of the Persons and cannot be had in the same way by the other Persons. Only the Son, for instance, can know that 'I am the Son'; if Father or Holy Spirit were to affirm 'I am the Son', they would be affirming a falsehood. Perhaps also it might be said that only the Son is able to know *from his own experience* what it is like to suffer and die on the Cross. Father and Holy Spirit know this only indirectly, through their knowledge of the Son's suffering.

But supposing this to be so, in what sense can the Trinity be said to know 'more than' each of the Persons? If the Trinity were literally a 'super-Mind' that

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somehow encompassed the minds, and the knowledge, of the three Persons, then perhaps it might know the first-person knowledge of each of them. That, however, is an option we have already ruled out. But if not that, then there literally is no mind that knows all of what each of the Persons know. So if knowledge of each Person's first-person truths is required for omniscience, the conclusion to be drawn is not that only the Trinity is omniscient but rather that there is no omniscient being.[32] (Note that this follows anyway, without reference to Trinitarian doctrine: each of us has her or his own first-person knowledge, which on present assumptions even God could not share!) Leftow considers some other options, but it should be clear from what has been said already that the notion that the Persons are only 'semi-omniscient' is unworkable.

A different sort of problem arises concerning the divine attribute of omnipotence. Here the main difficulty is not that each Person might have only part of the power needed to qualify as omnipotent – for instance, that each has only one-third of the power needed to create a universe, so that only the three together can manage the job. Rather, the difficulty is that the individual Persons, each supposedly omnipotent, may have the power to *impede one another* in the exercise of the power that each possesses. (We would thus have a literal instance of the classic dilemma of an irresistible force versus an immovable object!) Thus full omnipotence – the possession of a power that cannot possibly be resisted – belongs only to the Three together as they operate in harmony with one another.

Now, it will not bear thinking that *actual conflict* occurs between the Persons – that, for instance, the Son attempts to do something and the Father thwarts the attempt – so some provision must be made to stop this from occurring. One possibility, suggested by Swinburne but not endorsed by him, is that disputed questions might be decided by majority vote! Swinburne proposes that conflict is prevented by a series of rules, instigated by the Father in virtue of his 'priority of origin' over the Son and the Spirit, stating which Person shall have the prerogative as primary decision-maker in some specific sphere of divine activity.[33] Leftow, as one might expect, is not impressed by these options:

> [I]t is hard indeed to hold that any divine being has a form or degree of power than which a greater exists, or even than which a greater is conceivable. Further, it seems a reasonable requirement that a genuinely omnipotent power be one whose use no other power is great enough to impede. If this is true, then in ST as here sketched, no Person is omnipotent at all.[34]

My own intuitions, for what they are worth, go with Leftow at this point. This does not mean, however, that the problem before us lacks a solution. There is the view we found in Williams, which seems also to be that of the Cappodocian Fathers, that it is metaphysically necessary that there is a single *content of will* between the Persons of the Trinity. That is to say, the nature of God as the Trinity is such that it is impossible for there to be a disagreement in the content of the

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Persons' willing. If so, the possibility of conflict is ruled out from the start, and there is no obstacle to saying that both the Trinity and the Persons individually are omnipotent.

So far, we have a number of ways in which Social Trinitarians have attempted to defend their view as monotheistic, with at best limited success. However, it has not been shown that Social Trinitarianism is obliged to follow one of these strategies, so even if the criticisms are successful we do not yet have a refutation of Social Trinitarianism as such. Perhaps mindful of this, Leftow includes another, all-purpose objection:

> But even if Trinity monotheism avoids talk of degrees of deity, it faces a problem. Either the Trinity is a fourth case of the divine nature, in addition to the Persons, or it is not. If it is, we have too many cases of deity for orthodoxy. If it is not, and yet is divine, there are two ways to be divine – by being a case of deity, and by being a Trinity of such cases. If there is more than one way to be divine, Trinity monotheism becomes Plantingan Arianism.[35]

Here, I believe Leftow is guilty of overreaching; his argument, if successful, indicts Trinitarianism in general and not merely Trinity monotheism or Social Trinitarianism. Any Trinitarian, I take it, will want to say that the Persons are divine, and also that the Trinity is divine. But if so, there will be 'two ways to be divine' – by being a divine Person, or by being a Trinity of divine Persons.[36] Thus, according to Leftow, Arianism lurks at the door. The problem, of course, lies in the ambiguous phrase, 'more than one way to be divine'. For Arius, there were indeed two ways to be divine; that of the Father, who was truly God and possessed all of the essential divine attributes, and that of the Son, who lacked one or more of those attributes, notably the attribute of uncreatedness. But Social Trinitarians do not – certainly, they need not – say anything like that. They do, however, acknowledge that the Trinity, which is divine, has attributes (e.g. *being the Trinity*) which distinguish it from the Persons, each of whom is also divine – and for that matter, that the Persons individually have attributes (Fatherhood, Sonship, etc.) that distinguish them from each other. It is a wholly unjustified leap to infer from this that Social Trinitarians – or Trinitarians of any other stripe – are Arians.[37]

The results of our investigation up to this point are ambiguous. Leftow has claimed that 'ST cannot be both orthodox and a version of monotheism'. In support of this claim, he has examined several strategies employed by Social Trinitarians to show that their view is indeed monotheistic. Leftow's criticisms of these strategies seem to be effective in some respects. However, he has not shown, or claimed to show, that all Social Trinitarians must employ one or more of these strategies. And on the other hand, arguments directed against Social Trinitarianism as such, by Leftow and others (such as Howard-Snyder and Tuggy), do not appear to be successful. So far, then, we have a standoff: none of the strategies considered so far succeeds in refuting Leftow's charge, but neither

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have the critics of Social Trinitarianism conclusively vindicated the charge. Clearly, more remains to be done.

Another Social Trinitarian strategy

In the interest of further progress, we address here a proposal of Edward Wierenga.[38] According to Wierenga, the doctrine of the Trinity requires us to accept the following three propositions:

(1) There are three really distinct Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
(2) Each of the Persons is God.
(3) There is only one God.

The problem, of course, is that (1) and (2), taken together, seem to entail that there are three Gods, whereas (3) denies this. Wierenga's solution is to propose that 'is God' in (2) predicates a *property* of each of the Persons, namely the property of *being divine,* which is a distinct property from that of *being God.* There is, in fact, only one entity that is God; namely, the Trinity. Each of the Persons is divine, in that each possesses all of the divine attributes, such as omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, uncreatedness. But none of the Persons is identical with God, because no Person is identical with the Trinity as a whole. It would seem, then, that Wierenga's view is a version of Trinity monotheism, since he identifies the one God with the Trinity as a whole. However, his view improves on some of those surveyed in the previous section, in that he attributes each of the divine attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) to each of the Persons in an undiminished form. But since God has essentially the property of being the Trinity, none of the Persons is identical with God.

Jeffrey Brower has criticized this view on the grounds that there is no basis for Wierenga's distinction between the properties of *being divine* and *being God.*[39] According to the Athanasian Creed, 'the Father is God, the Son God, the Holy Spirit God; and yet there are not three Gods, but there is one God'. If in saying that each of the Persons is divine they had meant to attribute to the Persons some property other than *being God,* they had the Latin word *divinus* ready to hand; since they employed instead the word *deus,* it is gratuitous to suppose that they intended such a distinction. Furthermore, says Brower,

> … even if the Creed writers *had* employed '*divinus*', where they actually have '*deus*', we would still have grounds for rejecting Wierenga's interpretation. Judging by the way these terms are used in Latin, there is no sharp distinction to be drawn between the properties of being divine (*divinus*) and that of being a God (*deus*).[40]

In the light of this criticism by Brower I suggest that we modify Wierenga's proposal as follows: let us agree to interpret the Creed (and other comparable documents) as saying, not that the Persons are 'divine' (where *being divine*

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is taken to be a different property than *being God*), but that each of the Persons *is God*. However, *being God* in turn should not be interpreted, with Brower as 'being *a* God',[41] but as ascribing a *property* of Godhood, or deity, to each of the Persons. Part of my reason for this proposal is that, in reading rather large amounts of Christian Trinitarian literature, I do not recall reading anywhere, *except* in quite recent philosophical work, the assertion that any of the Trinitarian Persons 'is a God'. One has read or heard many discussions, and a great many more simple affirmations, of the *deity of Christ* – but I cannot recall a single instance of a Christian theologian, speaking in her or his own voice, saying that 'Jesus Christ is *a God*'. Such a long-standing tradition of usage, I suggest, should not lightly be set aside.

Now, a possible response might be that the reason for this pattern of usage is that the ancient languages, Greek and Latin, lack the indefinite pronoun; thus, the lack of the pronoun in English and other modern languages in documents that are dependent on those ancient languages. This is not convincing. There are vast numbers of translations from Greek and Latin into modern languages that are equipped with the indefinite pronoun, and translators have not hesitated to insert such pronouns where the text seems to call for them. Beyond that, I adduce a specific text in support of my suggestion.

The opening verse of the Gospel of John reads, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' The final clause reads, in Greek, *theos en ho logos*. By common consent, *theos* occupies the predicate position in this clause. Shall we then read it as 'The Word was a God'? I know of no widely accepted translation that does so – and that can't be for lack of attention to this crucial text. That is a translation only an Arian could be happy with![42] The writer has already distinguished the Word from God, *ho theos*: 'the Word was *with* God'. If he were then to tell us that the Word is *a God,* we would have a clear and direct affirmation of *another God* alongside of *ho theos* – but surely, this cannot be, and cannot possibly be what the writer intended. *theos* in the final clause is indeed a predicate, but it functions in effect as a predicate *adjective*, stating that the Logos has the property of *Godhood* or *deity*.

Brower, however, will not be satisfied with this. The Logos, we are told, has the property of Godhood. But then, the Father and the Holy Spirit must also have this property. And must not *God* – on Wierenga's view, the Trinity as a whole – also have the property of Godhood? Brower writes, 'if God *is* divine, where God is understood as [a] complex distinct from but composed of the divine Persons, then it would follow that there are four divine beings. But such a view certainly *seems* polytheistic – indeed, tetra-theistic as opposed to just tri-theistic.'[43]

This of course brings us back to Leftow's original complaint, that Social Trinitarianism cannot be both orthodox and monotheistic. By way of response, I believe we are now in a position to bring together some of the features that must be included in a credible Social Trinitarianism. The Social Trinitarian will

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want to insist that the Trinity is functionally unified in its relation to the created world, but will not rely on this to do the whole job of securing monotheism. He will *not* view the Trinity as a 'group mind', but will affirm the propriety of attributing thoughts and actions to the Trinity *as if* to a single person, in view of the tight coordination of the Trinitarian Persons in their joint activity. He will affirm, with Trinity monotheists, that the Trinity is the 'one and only God', and also that each of the Persons is in himself God. The divine attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, etc. belong to each Person fully and not in a diminished form.

Each Person is omniscient in virtue of his knowing every truth that it is logically possible for him to know. (If, as seems to be the case, each person's first-person knowledge is knowable to that person alone, knowledge of such truths regarding other persons is not required for omniscience.) Each Person is omnipotent in virtue of his being able to do anything it is possible for a perfect being to do. No created being is able to obstruct the exercise of divine power, and in virtue of their metaphysically necessary unity of will no conflict or obstruction can occur between the divine Persons. There seems to be no special difficulty in attributing other divine attributes, such as eternity, uncreatedness, and perfect goodness to the Persons individually. All this can be summed up by saying that each of Father, Son and Spirit is *wholly God*, but not *the whole of God*.

A borrowed solution

The ideas articulated above seem to be correct and defensible, in the light of our discussion to this point. However, we may feel the need for a model – a mental picture, so to speak – that brings the different strands together in a form that is readily grasped. Such a model cannot be developed in full at the end of an already lengthy paper. Instead, I propose to borrow some ideas from Brian Leftow himself – that is, from his own constructive proposal for the doctrine of the Trinity.[44] In Leftow's proposal, there is just *one* divine being; there is a *single* person who is God. Leftow, however, is no unitarian. For this one divine person lives his life – or perhaps we should say, his *lives* – in *three distinct series of experiences* or '*life-strands.*' In Leftow's own words:

> God always lives His life in three discrete strands at once, no event of His life occurring in more than one strand and no strand succeeding another. In one strand God lives the Father's life, in one the Son's, and in one the Spirit's. The events of each strand add up to the life of a Person. The lives of the Persons add up to the life God lives *as* the three Persons. There is one God, but He is many in the events of his life … .[45]

This is a conception that calls for some careful reflection. There is just *one* person (but *not,* one Person: the Trinitarian Persons are not persons!) who is God, but he is, one might say, a very *complex* person, in having three simultaneous,

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ongoing life-strands of experiences. Where, then, do the three Persons of the Trinity come into the picture? The answer is as follows: God the Father is *God-living-the-Father-life-strand*; God the Son is *God-living-the-Son-life-strand*; and God the Holy Spirit is *God-living-the-Spirit-life-strand*. We do not have three *persons,* understanding that word in its ordinary sense, but there are three *personal lives,* each lived simultaneously by one and the same person, namely God. Note, furthermore, that there is no *additional* life-strand, in which God is conscious of all three life-strands at once.

Social Trinitarians will have mixed responses to Leftow's proposal. In its favour, it can be pointed out that he has managed both to preserve a monotheistic conception of God and at the same time to maintain that there are these three distinct life-strands in which God, so to speak, plays the roles traditionally ascribed to the Trinitarian Persons. Leftow goes on,

> If one asks what sort of persons the Persons are, on this account, the right answer is that they are whatever sort God is – the Persons just *are* God … , God has His own thoughts as Father and Son. But … God does not think His Father-thoughts at the points in His life at which He is Son. … God can token with truth 'I am the Father' and 'I am the Son.' But … God cannot token with truth 'I am the Son' at points in His life at which He is Father.[46]

Leftow even suggests that the Persons of the Trinity, so considered, might enjoy personal relationships with each other and might engage in dialogue with one another.[47]

There is much here that is good from a Social Trinitarian standpoint. Over against this, however, is the *very* peculiar nature of God's personal life, as conceived by Leftow. A *single* person, experiencing simultaneously three *different* strands of personal existence, without any internal access to each other? This is certainly a very strange conception, lacking any real analogy in our normal experience. To be sure, it might be observed that we must expect the Trinitarian God to be something different from, and far beyond, our everyday experience. But the fact that this conception does not have any clear precedent in the Trinitarian tradition should, I think, give us pause.[48]

Beyond this, we should not overestimate the extent to which the Persons are distinct on Leftow's account. God as Father cannot truthfully say, 'I am the Son', if he means by that, '*I am now* (*in this life-strand*) *experiencing the Son-life-strand*'. He can, however, say truthfully that '*I am the person* [not the Trinitarian Person] *who experiences the Son-life-strand.*' He cannot say, 'I, the Father, suffered and died on the Cross'. But he can say, 'I am the person who, *as the Son,* suffered and died on the Cross'. The difference between the Persons is a good deal less pronounced than many have supposed it to be. In the Gospels, we have the spectacle of God-as-Son *praying to himself*, namely to God-as-Father. Perhaps most poignant of all are the words of abandonment on the cross, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'. On the view we are considering, this

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comes out as '*Why have I-as-Father forsaken myself-as-Son?*'. But is this really what the Gospels are saying?

For those of us who are troubled by this aspect of Leftow's view, a remedy readily suggests itself. Instead of *one* person, namely God, experiencing *all three* of the multiple life-strands, we simply posit a distinct subject of experience for each of the strands. These subjects of experience will of course be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moreland and Craig put it like this: 'Suppose, then, that God is a soul which is endowed with three complete sets of rational cognitive faculties, each sufficient for personhood.'[49] Thus, the Trinitarian Persons are persons, which is the key claim of Social Trinitarianism, and they are unambiguously able to love and commune with one another, something which is at best a marginal possibility on Leftow's view. We no longer have the extremely peculiar conception of God as a single person with three separate strands of life-experience, and we are able to take the Gospels at face value when they portray the relationship between Father and Son as a relationship between two distinct persons.

These are the advantages gained by the revision of Leftow's view, but what are the costs? So far as I can see, the *only* cost (in comparison with Leftow's own view) is the one expressed in the last phrase of the quotation from Craig and Moreland, where they affirm that the 'three complete sets of rational cognitive faculties' are *each sufficient for personhood.* The three sets of faculties arguably must be there for Leftow as well; they are needed in order to support the three discrete life-strands that make up the lives of the three Persons. Given this much, why should the faculties in question *not* be sufficient for personhood? This, it seems, is the one point at which those who embrace Leftow's proposal as a viable option must try to show that Social Trinitarianism is objectionable. Is there some reason why the Neo-Leftovian view proposed here fails to be intelligible, orthodox, and a version of monotheism?[50]

To be sure, in a full treatment of this topic it would not be acceptable to assume at the outset that Leftovian Trinitarianism provides an acceptable platform on which to build. My use of Leftow's view has the character of an *argumentum ad hominem,* making assumptions that will be acceptable to at least one important interlocutor even though they have not been shown independently to be correct. More generally, however, this paper poses a challenge to the opponents of Social Trinitarianism: if this view is not both orthodox and monotheistic, the burden lies on them to show why not.[51,52]

Notes

1. In an important interdisciplinary collection dealing with the Trinity, all three of the historical studies dealing with the post-Nicene period challenge the conventional readings of Eastern and Western Trinitarianism. See Joseph T. Lienhard SJ '*Ousia* and *Hypostasis*: the Cappodocian settlement and the theology of ''One *Hypostasis*'''; Sarah Coakley '''Persons'' in the ''social'' doctrine of the Trinity: A critique of current analytic discussion'; and Michel René Barnes 'Rereading Augustine's theology

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of the Trinity'; all in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall SJ, & Gerald O'Collins SJ (eds) *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. Dale Tuggy 'Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism', *Religious Studies*, **40** (2004), 269–287, 285, n.1.
3. Henceforth I shall use 'Persons' to refer to the Trinitarian Three; the term is intended to be noncommittal as to the nature of the Three. Our ordinary conception of persons will be indicated by the lower-case 'person'.
4. The matter is brought sharply into focus by Karl Rahner's assertion that 'there is properly no *mutual* love between Father and Son, for this would presuppose two acts'; Rahner *The Trinity*, Joseph Donceel (trans.) (New York NY: Crossroad, 2002; German original 1967), 106. Rahner makes it clear that he would be happy to abandon the term 'person' altogether, were he permitted by the Church to do so. It is difficult to find equally unambiguous statements from the contemporary analytic critics of Social Trinitarianism.
5. There is a special problem in that both *prosopon* and *persona* were sometimes used in the sense of 'mask' – something that could be worn in a theatrical production. It is clear, however, that this sense does not capture the principal meaning of these terms as used by the Fathers.
6. J. P. Moreland & William Lane Craig *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), ch. 29, 'Christian doctrines of the Trinity'.
7. Daniel Howard-Snyder 'Trinity monotheism', *Philosophia Christi*, **5** (2003), 375–404, 383.
8. *Ibid*., 399.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Note that if God is timeless, as the majority of the theological tradition has held, it will in any case be strictly and literally false to say that God *created* (past tense). Following Howard-Snyder's lead, then, we have a quick and easy refutation of divine timelessness. It's too bad this did not occur to Augustine, Boethius, and Anselm; we could have been saved so much heavy intellectual labour!
11. But, then again, perhaps not all that unusual, given that Howard-Snyder is an analytical philosopher? Speaking as a member of that guild myself, I would have to say that an over-zealous insistence on language that is strictly literal and univocal is one of the occupational hazards of the trade.
12. See Tuggy 'Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism.'
13. See William Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', in Michael Rea & Thomas McCall (eds) *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38–51. However, the specific answer proposed here is not given in that article.
14. Tuggy 'Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism', 275.
15. For a brief but insightful introduction to the development of doctrine, see Jaroslav Pelikan *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1969).
16. Brian Leftow 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', in Davis, Kendall, & O'Collins *The Trinity*, 203.
17. Richard Swinburne *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 180f.
18. *Idem* 'Could there be more than one God?', *Faith and Philosophy*, **5** (1988), 225–241.
19. For this criticism see Leftow, 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', 232–234.
20. It is not clear, however, that very many Social Trinitarians have actually adopted this strategy. Leftow's only recent examples are David Brown & C. F. J. Williams, but neither example holds up under scrutiny. Beyond these two, Leftow mentions two earlier writers, John Champion *Personality and the Trinity* (New York NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1935), and Charles Bartlett *The Triune God* (New York NY: American Tract Society, 1937).
21. For additional details see Kathleen V. Wilkes *Real People: Personal Identity Without Thought Experiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). My own assessment of the data will be found in 'Persons and the unity of consciousness', in George Bealer & Rob Koons (eds) *The Waning of Materialism: New Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 175–190.
22. There are some passages in David Brown which might lead one to suppose that he endorses such a view. That he does not, however, is clearly shown by the following quotation: 'Thus, though in some ways such a society [as the Trinity is supposed to be] functions just like a person, there remains the most important respect in which it is not a person, namely, that it has no existence in itself but only through what are already indisputably persons'; Brown 'Trinitarian personhood and individuality', in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr (eds) *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 72f.

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23. Leftow suggests that this is an attempt to slide between the other two alternatives.
24. C. J. F. Williams 'Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance', in Alan F. Padgett (ed.) *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 242.
25. Leftow 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', 225f.
26. Williams 'Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance', 240.
27. A referee notes that for Williams to use 'there is a single act of willing' to express the sense suggested here would be 'remarkably infelicitous'. This may indeed be infelicitous, but some interpretation along these lines seems to be required if we are to avoid outright inconsistency with the passage quoted at the beginning of this paragraph.
28. Leonard Hodgson *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Nisbet, 1943), 101; cited in Leftow 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', 209.
29. Moreland & Craig *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 589.
30. Leftow 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', 209; the reference is to C. Stephen Layman 'Tritheism and the Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy*, **5** (1988), 291–298; and Keith Yandell 'The most brutal and inexcusable error in counting? Trinity and consistency', *Religious Studies*, **30** (1994), 201–217, 205, 216. It should be noted that Layman only suggests this as a logical possibility; he is not committed to its being true.
31. *Ibid.*, 210; the reference is to David Brown *The Divine Trinity* (La Salle IL: Open Court, 1985), 300f.
32. A referee asks, if the Trinity can be referred to analogically as if to a single person, why can't the Trinity be 'analogously omniscient'? All I can say here is that it seems to me that such an analogical usage would be too much of a stretch. The Trinity as a whole can be omniscient in virtue of knowledge that is *shared* between the Persons, but it seems very strained to attribute omniscience to the Trinity in virtue of knowledge, parts of which are had by each Person but which *cannot* be shared with the other two. In any case, I reject the assumption that an omniscient person would have to know the first-person truths of all other persons.
33. Swinburne *The Christian God*, 172–175.
34. Leftow 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', 220.
35. *Ibid.*, 221. The reference is to Cornelius Plantinga, not to Alvin.
36. For instance: for Leftow himself, God the Father is divine by being 'God-living-the-Father-life-stream'. (See the concluding section of this paper for explanation.) The Trinity, on the other hand, is divine by being 'God-living-simultaneously-the-three-life-streams-as-Father-Son-and-Holy-Spirit'. The Father has attributes the Trinity as a whole does not have, and vice versa.
37. Plantinga makes all this perfectly clear in his own discussion of the topic; see Cornelius Plantinga, Jr 'Social Trinity and Tritheism', in Feenstra and Plantinga (eds) *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, 34.
38. Edward Wierenga 'Trinity and polytheism', *Faith and Philosophy*, **21** (2004), 281–294.
39. Jeffrey Brower 'The problem with Social Trinitarianism: a reply to Wierenga', *Faith and Philosophy*, **21** (2004), 295–303.
40. *Ibid.*, 297f.
41. This interpretation of 'being God' is suggested by Brower's assertion, quoted above, that 'being *deus*' should be understand as 'being a God'. In Brower's joint article with Michael Rea, they define '*x* is a God' as '*x* is a hylomorphic compound whose 'matter' is some divine essence', where the context makes clear that the definiens is held to be true of the divine Persons. See Jeffrey E. Brower & Michael C. Rea 'Material constitution and the Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy*, **22** (2005), 57–76, 69.
42. I am informed by Alan Padgett that the New World Translation, used by the Jehovah's Witnesses, translates, 'the Word was a god'. And *The New Testament in an Improved Version*, published by a Unitarian committee in 1908, has 'and the word was a god'.
43. Brower 'The problem with Social Trinitarianism', 299.
44. Brian Leftow 'A Latin Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy*, **21** (2004), pp. 304–333. For my critique of Leftow's proposal, see 'A Leftovian Trinity?', *Faith and Philosophy*, **26** (2009), 154–166.
45. Leftow 'A Latin Trinity', 312. I have decided not to discuss here Leftow's intriguing parallel concerning Jane, a dancer who, as a result of repeated use of a time-travel machine, is able to fulfil multiple roles on stage during a single performance. Interested readers should consult Leftow's original article and my critique.
46. *Ibid.*, 314f.
47. *Ibid.*, 308.

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48. Leftow claims a precedent in Aquinas, but one that I find strained and unconvincing. Readers, however, should decide about this for themselves; see *Ibid.*, 315–316.
49. Moreland & Craig *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 594. It will be noted that we have now moved a long way from Tuggy's characterization of the Social Trinity as 'a mere group of individuals'. If Moreland and Craig qualify as Social Trinitarians (and there seems to be no dispute about that), it is clear that Social Trinitarianism can involves modes of unity for the divine Persons that go far beyond Tuggy's description of the view.
50. One reader of the manuscript asked, 'Once the life-strands are understood as three distinct subjects of experience, what is left of the unity of the divine person with which Leftow began?' I reply that we are left, not with the unity of a single divine *person*, but nevertheless with a single divine substance: in Moreland & Craig's words, a 'soul which is endowed with three complete sets of rational cognitive faculties'.
51. I would like to call to the reader's attention the important article by Tom McCall 'Social Trinitarianism and Tritheism again: a response to Brian Leftow', *Philosophica Christi*, **5** (2003), 405–430. Some of McCall's criticisms of Leftow parallel points made in this essay, while others delve into areas not addressed here. Especially helpful is McCall's account of elements in the Trinitarian tradition that sit poorly with Leftow's understanding of 'Latin Trinitarianism'.
52. My thanks to Alan Padgett, Thomas Tracy, and to an unnamed referee for this journal for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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