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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The functional mind and the trinitarian God

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## Abstract

Within the space of monotheistic options, trinitarian monotheism holds a puzzling place. It asserts that God is a single being who is, somehow, also three distinct persons. This form of monotheism has regularly been charged with being either inconsistent, unintelligible, or undermotivated – and possibly all three. While recent explorations of trinitarian monotheism have tended to rely on work in metaphysics, this paper turns to the philosophy of mind, showing that functionalist theories of mind prove to be surprisingly hospitable to trinitarian monotheism. This paper will address only the inconsistency and unintelligibility objections, showing that if role-functionalism (or something near enough) is both consistent and conceivable, then it is both consistent and conceivable that: God is a single being who is exactly three distinct persons because there is one primary divine person who interacts with exactly one system-sharing re-realisation of his own person-type.

**Keywords:** God; trinity; functionalism; monotheism; philosophy of mind

## Introduction

*Monotheism*, for present purposes, is the view that there exists just one personal being whose knowledge, power, and rationality are jointly maximal. Monotheists reserve the name 'God' for this personal being.[1] *Trinitarian monotheism* is a version of monotheism that says God is not merely a personal being, but God is a tripersonal being, that is, God is three distinct persons. This form of monotheism has regularly been charged with being either inconsistent, unintelligible, or philosophically undermotivated – and possibly all three.[2] Call this the *trinitarian trilemma*.

A prominent response to this trilemma among philosophers has involved the development of models of the trinitarian God that borrow from established work in metaphysics. The body of work drawn upon has involved ideas about relative identity, time travel, hylomorphic compounds, spatially extended simples, *qua* objects, persisting fissioned individuals, and other metaphysical marvels.[3] The aim of these forays into metaphysics is to discover a consistency proof (or proof sketch) that can also help blunt the force of the unintelligibility charge. In contrast, however, some have sought to blunt the force of the unintelligibility charge by, surprisingly, *endorsing* the inconsistency charge. This approach has involved the exposition of non-classical logics on which we can understand (or at least *better* understand) metaphysical structures that involve true contradictions.[4] But when it comes to the undermotivation objection, philosophical defences of trinitarianism are

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largely silent. This is because most philosophers of religion appear to hold that the primary evidence for a tripersonal view of God, if there is any, comes from theological sources (creeds, scriptures, traditions) rather than from *a priori* insight.[5]

The approach to the trinitarian trilemma to follow is unlike these. Instead of turning to recent work in metaphysics, it turns to recent work in the philosophy of mind. In particular, it turns to the widely endorsed role-functionalist theory of mind to demonstrate the following:

> *Weak Functionalist Trinitarianism*: If role-functionalism is both consistent and conceivable, then it is both consistent and conceivable that God is a single being who is exactly three distinct persons because there is one primary divine person who interacts with exactly one system-sharing re-realisation of his own person-type.[6]

The first section outlines the standard role-functionalist account of mental states, minds, and persons. On this view, mental state-types, mind-types, and person-types are functional kinds and these are realised in systems whenever a system has (instantiates) the relevant function. Systems with mental states can be made up of *any* kind of substances (material or immaterial) provided the substance in question instantiates the relevant function.[7] While this paper relies on standard role-functionalism, its main conclusions can also be reached from non-reductionist and anti-physicalist variations on role-functionalism (noted below). Further, while this paper is anchored in role-functionalism, certain other forms of functionalism will likewise support the same kinds of claims about the trinity, for example, realiser-functionalism. Henceforth, 'functionalism' should be taken to refer only to role-functionalism.[8]

The next section develops a functionalist account of the second person of the trinity. Functionalism entails personal beings, including God, are systems that realise the structured network of functional roles that individuate person-types. This opens up what functionalists should view as a consistent and conceivable *possibility*: God has a constituent person – call him *God*$^{1}$ – who intentionally brings forth a maximally accurate, system-sharing, re-realisation *of his own person-type*. It will be argued that God$^{1}$, under certain assumptions, would have this ability and that this way of re-realising God$^{1}$'s person-type in the same system would yield a second token divine person who is 'of the same substance' with God$^{1}$. We'll call this second divine person *God*$^{2}$.

The following section leverages a widely acknowledged entailment of functionalism: the interaction of token persons can itself realise further person-kinds. This entails that: if God$^{1}$ and God$^{2}$ jointly interact in ways that realise the network of functional roles associated with *God*$^{1}$*'s person-type*, then another token-distinct person will result. Assuming all of God$^{1}$'s and God$^{2}$'s interactions are intra-system interactions, this third system-sharing, re-realisation of God$^{1}$'s person-type – call him *God*$^{3}$ – will be 'of one substance' with God$^{1}$ and God$^{2}$. A distinctive feature of this approach to the trinity is that it entails that God is not only *one tripersonal being*, but that each token person is a realisation of *one type of divine person*.

The final section ends with a discussion of whether functionalist trinitarianism is compatible with God having a simple substance.

## Weak functionalist trinitarianism I: towards the second person

What could God$^{1}$ do in order to generate a second divine person without generating a second substance? Functionalism entails an answer: God$^{1}$ could bring about a second realisation of his person-type in the same substance that serves as his realising system. We

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will quickly describe the typical functionalist view of mental states, minds, and personhood as well as a couple variations on functionalism that trinitarians can, if they wish, take advantage of: non-reductive functionalism and anti-physicalist functionalism. Next we will explain how and why functionalism entails that God[1] can generate a second divine realisation of his own person-type without generating a second substance.

### *Functionalist theories of mind*

Functionalism is a, if not *the*, leading approach to the metaphysics of mind in contemporary philosophy.[9] Functionalism is often introduced with obvious functional kinds: barriers, vehicles, traps, pumps, locks, calculators, leaders, law enforcement officers, and so on. These are defined not in terms of *the stuff* they are made of (silver, steel, plastic, silicon, grey matter, human bodies, souls, or some combination thereof), but in terms of *the functional role* they fulfil in a system. The kind of stuff that instances of them are made of only matters insofar as that kind of stuff is required to fulfil a given role in a system.

Let's walk through, at a rather high level, how functionalists think of particular mental states before mentioning their view of minds and persons. Take Socrates's *belief that it is raining*. Beliefs are a functional kind, a kind whose essential characteristics involve: specific ways of interacting with evidential inputs (e.g., perceiving rain, hearing weather reports, feeling raindrops); specific ways of interacting with other mental states (e.g., the desire not to get wet); specific ways of contributing to the formation of intentions (e.g., intending to take an umbrella or remain indoors); and a tendency to produce corresponding behaviours under certain conditions (e.g., retrieving an umbrella or choosing not to go outside). These 'specific ways of interacting' are to be specified largely in terms of counterfactual dependence relations. So *a belief that it is raining* is a type of mental state that is to be identified with that type of functional role, while *Socrates's token belief* is *the realisation of that functional role* in Socrates. The realisation of mental states in Socrates happens in virtue of Socrates instantiating a lower-level or 'base' property (e.g., having a certain neuronal arrangement) that has the functional role of the mental state in question.[10]

A distinctive characteristic of functionalism is the *multiple realisability* of mental states: the kind of substance that makes up a system (biological, artificial, immaterial souls) does not matter so long as the system can instantiate the lower-level properties that realise mental states. Accordingly, functionalism implies that mental states can be not only realised in Socrates, but also *re-realised* in Socrates. Take a case of redundant memory storage. All that is needed for a re-realisation of a memory to occur in Socrates is for Socrates to twice instantiate the lower-level property that realised that memory to begin with, or for Socrates to instantiate a different lower-level property that realises that memory's characteristic functional profile. Hence multiple realisability can occur *within single individuals* as well as across distinct individuals.

So functionalism treats *mental state types* as abstract role types, and it treats concrete *individuals with minds* as systems that instantiate token mental states in virtue of instantiating lower-level realisers, for example certain neuronal arrangements. So any system that instantiates mental states has a mind in at least a minimal sense. Like mental state types, *mind-types* are individuated by functional organisation: structured networks of functional roles. A collection of token states $m_1...m_n$ (e.g., beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.) belongs to one mind just when $m_1...m_n$ stand in the right pattern of mutual dependence (counterfactual/control) relations that integrate belief, desire, intention, etc. A single system can instantiate many mental state tokens without those tokens all being part of one mind. Functionalists can say, for example, that this is what separates the beliefs of Jekyll from those of Hyde. Jekyll and Hyde may be distinct minds instantiated in a single system (e.g., one brain) owing to a lack of functional integration among their mental states.

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What is the relation between systems and substances (i.e., the bearers of properties)? The individual substance(s) that yield a mind (i.e., a mental state instantiating system) can in principle be a collection of distinct substances, a single mereologically composite substance, or a single mereologically non-composite (simple) substance. All that matters is that the substance(s) in question instantiate the lower-level properties that realise the relevant functional roles.[11]

Minds may fail to be *persons*. Newborn lambs realise mental states given that they see, hear, and respond to things in their environment. But they fall short of the robust kind of personhood that is characteristic of mature human beings and divine persons. While characterisations of this sort of personhood can differ, such persons are widely taken to be minds that are *conscious, self-conscious*, and *have rational capacities*.[12] The relevant rational capacities are generally treated as a matter of having a constellation of functionally characterisable abilities involving reasons.[13] As such persons are conscious, self-conscious, and rational beings, they are not abstract types that can be multiply realised. But *mind-types* and *person-types* are abstract kinds and these are multiply realisable. Were God to have cloned Adam rather than making Eve, he would have brought about two realisations of the person-type of Adam. There would then have been *two token persons*, but only *one person-type*.

Not all who are sympathetic to the functionalist account of mental states, minds, and persons embrace it without qualification. For example, Chalmers (1996, 247–249) has argued for *non-reductive functionalism* on which only non-phenomenal mental states can be identified with functional states, while phenomenal/conscious mental states are to be seen as systematically correlated with functional mental states. Alternatively, some might wish to maintain that the functionalist framework that fits best with traditional monotheism is one that adds the constraint that only immaterial substances (souls) are capable of realising the functional organisations sufficient for genuine mental states. This would be an *anti-physicalist functionalism*. Importantly, the view of the trinity to emerge below is consistent with these deviations from standard functionalism, and for expressive convenience we will limit our attention to standard functionalism.

## *From functionalism to the second person of the trinity*

The idea that God[1] could cause or bring about a distinct co-equal person is not new to philosophical theology. Following Augustine (2012) and Richard of St. Victor (1958), Swinburne (2018, 429) takes this to be a straightforward implication of God[1] having maximal power. But we do not want to take this for granted without discussion. For we want to establish the claim that a being like God[1] would have what it takes to bring about the re-realisation of *his own person-type in his own system*.

According to traditional monotheistic views, God[1] has maximal knowledge. This includes both propositional knowledge (knowledge of truths) as well as practical knowledge (knowledge of how to do things). Now, God's propositional knowledge extends to God[1] himself, that is, God[1] knows all the truths it is broadly logically possible for him to know about himself.[14] Now, standard views of propositional knowledge entail that persons have propositional knowledge because they have certain representational mental states (e.g., beliefs).[15] Assuming the same is true of God[1]'s propositional knowledge, God[1]'s propositional self-knowledge is constituted by a collection of self-representational mental states.

It is implausible to maintain that the collection of God[1]'s self-representational mental states *themselves* realise the functional role persons.[16] But, according to functionalism, God[1]'s propositional self-knowledge and practical knowledge give him an opportunity. For God[1] is a person who is himself realised in a particular system (presumably an immaterial substance). And God[1]'s knowledge will not only include facts about his mental states, it will also include *knowledge of facts about how his mental states are realised in his system* as well

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as *knowledge how to bring about realisations of minds like his own within systems like his own*. To assume otherwise would be to assume that God[1]'s propositional and practical knowledge is not maximal.

Knowing all the facts about how a mind is related to its system as well as knowing how to bring about a realisation of a mind in a system is not generally enough to ensure that one has *the ability or power* to do so.[17] For example, when we are considering the possibility of realising two minds within a single existing system, the issue becomes one of *the capacity* of the system in question. Some might worry, then, that God[1]'s system is already 'maxed out' by God[1] himself and thus is not capable of enabling a re-realisation of God[1]'s person-type. This is a worry that has bite with finite systems: for if the capacities of your system have an upper bound, it may not be possible for it to enable a re-realisation of your person-type.

But this worry gains less traction in the case of *infinite systems*, that is, systems that have the capacity to realise infinitely many states and dependence relations among those states. That is, assume the number of states and dependency relations among the states capable of being realised in God's system is some order of infinity $\aleph_n$. Any system capable of realising $\aleph_n$-many states and dependency relations has the capacity to host $2 \times \aleph_n$ such states and dependency relations. This is an entailment of the mathematically trivial result that for any natural number $\kappa$ and any infinite quantity $\aleph_n$: $\kappa \times \aleph_n = \aleph_n$.[18] Since the natural numbers are countably infinite, you can select any arbitrarily large finite number $\kappa$ within the natural numbers and the result of multiplying it by $\aleph_n$ will remain $\aleph_n$. Thus, for any natural number $\kappa$, if God[1] is realised in an infinite system, then God[1]'s system has the capacity to host $\kappa$-many *more* realisations of God[1]'s person-type.[19] We will assume in what follows that God[1]'s maximal knowledge and power require that God[1]'s person-type be realised in an infinite system in the sense noted above. Within the space of monotheistic views, it is not unusual to maintain that God is infinite in various senses. What is unusual is the way it is being recast in functionalist terms: a mind with infinite capacity requires the system that instantiates it to have infinite capacity.

Take the following collection of claims:

> *The Maximality Package.* God[1] is maximally powerful. God[1] has maximal propositional and practical knowledge. God[1] is himself instantiated in an infinite system (because that system hosts a realisation of his person-type).

The Maximality Package appears to entail the following:

> *The Power of Perfect Self-Re-Realisation (PPSR).* God[1] has the power and knowledge to bring about a re-realisation of his own person-type in his own system in a way that is maximally accurate.

If God[1] has this power, then the result of God[1] exercising such power would be a token-distinct person according to functionalism. Again, let's refer to this prospective second token instance of God[1]'s person-type as *God*[2].

For the Maximality Package to fail to entail PPSR, it would have to be the case that God[1]'s power, knowledge, or system could be limited in some way that either (i) prevented *any* additional realisation of his person-type, or (ii) prevented a re-realisation of his person-type *that is maximally accurate*. Standard views about God[1]'s extremely high degree of knowledge and power will not support blocking the entailment at (i). But blocking the entailment at (ii) requires an *unintended* reading of 'maximal accuracy'. So we'll now say a couple of words about that.

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To claim that God[2] is a maximally accurate re-realisation of God[1] is not to claim that they share all their intrinsic features. For God[1]'s maximal power and self-knowledge can only ensure that there are no *avoidable* differences between God[1] and God[2]. But some differences cannot be avoided. For example, if God[2] is to have maximal knowledge he should believe no falsehoods. Thus, he should not, for example, believe that he is numerically identical to God[1] even though God[1] will believe that he is identical to God[1]. In general, God[2] should not believe falsehoods about who he is, who God[1] is, and what relations they stand in to each other. All of this logically requires that God[1] and God[2] have some distinct mental states.[20] This is all consistent with the intended reading of 'maximal accuracy'.

Now, if God[1] re-realises his own person-type in his own system in a way that's maximally accurate, then God[2]'s powers cannot fail to be as expansive as his own. For functionalism seems to imply that God[1] has the powers that he has because of *the kind* of person that he is and because of *the kind* of system his mind is realised in. Since God[2] is a maximally accurate re-realisation of God[1] in the same system, it follows that God[2] and God[1] should share the same powers.

For that same reason, God[1] and God[2] will be alike in their power *to freely act* and this will bring about further unavoidable differences between God[1] and God[2]. For if God[2] is a maximally accurate re-realisation of God[1], and God[1]'s power to act freely is a product of God[1] being the kind of person that he is, then God[2] must enjoy the same degree of freedom that God[1] does. Thus, when it comes to purely discretionary actions (free actions that are not required by God[1]'s nature) God[1] and God[2] might make different choices or have (or develop) different preferences. So in addition to having some distinct beliefs, God[1] and God[2] may well develop distinct preference states. Again, all of this is consistent with the intended reading of 'maximal accuracy'.

Let's quickly summarise where we're at. This section has argued that *if* functionalism is true, then all persons exist in virtue of systems having lower-level properties that realise the functional profile of a person-type. The same is true of God[1]. And since he is a person of maximal power and maximal (propositional and practical) knowledge in an infinite system, God[1] has the capacity to bring about a second, maximally accurate realisation of his own person-type in his own system.

## Weak functionalist trinitarianism II: towards the third person

The consistency and conceivability of trinitarian monotheism *could* be defended by arguing that God[1] could bring about a second re-realisation of himself. But this will not be the defence given here. Rather, it will be argued that the trinitarian can exploit a widely recognised *entailment* of functionalism: that the interaction between persons can itself realise a further person. In the trinitarian tradition this general idea is not new. Friedman (2010) traces a tradition in Christian thought stemming from Augustine (cf. De Trin. XV.15.29, XV.6.10) through the Franciscan tradition where the Holy Spirit is a further distinct divine person who emanates from *the voluntary love shared between* the Father and the Son. This is also the view of Jonathan Edwards (2008 [1740], 121–141).

Of course, it is a familiar idea that two things of the same kind can be related in a way that forms a third instance of the same kind. Two rectangles may form a further rectangle. However, the idea that persons could interact in ways that form further persons is not transparently true. This somewhat surprising entailment of functionalism has been widely discussed in relation to Ned Block's (1978) 'China Brain' thought experiment. The next section presents Block's thought experiment and Chalmers's (1996) functionalist response, both of which are instructive. With that as background, it will be argued that if functionalism is consistent and conceivable, then it is consistent and conceivable that God[1] and

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God[2] host the kind of interpersonal interactions needed to jointly bring about a further re-realisation of God[1]'s person-type.

### *Collective person realism*

Can a collection of distinct persons interact in ways that yield a further distinct person? For present purposes, answering this question in perfect generality is irrelevant. What is relevant is what follows *from functionalism*. That is, what we are concerned with is whether the following conditional is true:

> *Collective Person Realism (CPR).* If functionalism is true, then a new individual person results whenever a collection of distinct individual persons jointly engage each other in ways that realise the function of an individual person.

The qualification 'individual' is meant to highlight an unintended reading of CPR on which *performative* (/*group*, /*collective*) persons are said to exist in virtue of the activities of individual persons. Corporations, administrations, school boards, and the like are examples of performative persons, each of which exists in virtue of the activities of their individual members.[21]

But performative persons cannot easily rescue trinitarians from their trilemma for two reasons. First, it's not clear that performative persons, in their familiar manifestations, have all the essential properties of individual persons. Corporations, administrations, school boards, and the like are not plausibly regarded as conscious and self-conscious. So they are not 'persons' in the way required for trinitarianism. Second, for most trinitarians, all members of the trinity are supposed to be persons *in the same sense* of 'person'. So even though one could argue for a non-standard version of trinitarianism on which the third person of the trinity is merely a non-conscious performative person, this would be attractive to very few trinitarians.

Now, CPR is true. Functionalists and anti-functionalists have noted this. To appreciate this it helps to consider Ned Block's (1978) 'China Brain' thought experiment, which involves a case like this:

> *Socially Realised Brain.* Take an arbitrary adult human being $S^1$ at some time interval $t_1$-$t_n$. It is possible that there exists an individual person $S^2$ who has the same kinds of internal psychological and experiential states as $S^1$ at the time interval $t_1$-$t_n$ *because* the Chinese nation brings about a realisation of the very same kind of total functional organisation that $S^1$'s brain had during the time interval $t_1$-$t_n$. The Chinese nation does this by having all its citizens interact with hand-held radios in ways that accurately mirror the activity of $S^1$'s neurons during the time interval $t_1$-$t_n$.

This kind of case was issued as an objection to functionalism: a functional organisation involving lots of individual people with hand-held radios *seems* incapable of yielding a mind that has conscious experiences, for example experiences of pain, pleasure, colour, hope, desire, and the like.

But in defence of functionalism, Chalmers (1996) has argued that cases like the Socially Realised Brain are *highly* under-described, representing only a caricature of the functionalist's position. Indeed, when cases like the Socially Realised Brain are resolved into detail sufficient to accurately represent the functionalist view, the intuition that a nation of people cannot realise the same kind of mind that a brain does loses its force. He writes:

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> The system [involving the Chinese population] would need to have over a billion parts each with a number of states of its own (say, ten each). Between these states there would have to be a vast, intricate system of just the right causal connections, so that given this state pattern, then this state pattern will result, given that state pattern, then that state pattern will result, and so on. To realize the functional organization in question, these conditionals cannot be mere regularities (where this state pattern happens to be followed by that state pattern on this occasion); they have to be reliable, counterfactual-supporting connections, such that this state pattern will be followed by that state pattern whenever it comes up.
>
> It is not hard to see that about $10^{10^{\wedge}9}$ such conditionals will be required of a system in order that it realize the appropriate functional organization, if we suppose a division into a billion parts. ... Once we realize how tightly a specification of functional organization constrains the structure of a system, it becomes less implausible that even the population of China could support conscious experience if organized appropriately. *If we take our image of the population, speed it up by a factor of a million or so, and shrink it into an area the size of a head, we are left with something that looks a lot like a brain, except that it has homunculi—tiny people—where a brain would have neurons.* On the face of it, there is not much reason to suppose that neurons should do any better a job than homunculi in supporting [conscious] experience. (Chalmers 1996, 249–253, emphasis added)

This defence of functionalism along with Block's objection ratifies, rather than resists, CPR. For functionalism entails that the Chinese nation or homunculi can bring about a realisation of the function of an individual person. Readers sceptical of functionalism owing to the entailment of CPR and the possibility of the Socially Realised Brain are encouraged to remember that the purpose of this paper is not to convince you of functionalism; rather, the point is to convince you of what follows for trinitarianism *if* functionalism is consistent and conceivable. At any rate, readers uncomfortable with standard functionalism at this point might be more comfortable thinking about what follows in terms of some anti-physicalist version of functionalism on which only immaterial substances can realise minds.

## *Towards the third person of the trinity*

CPR is good news for the trinitarian. For CPR entails that: if (i) God$^1$ brought about a maximally accurate re-realisation of his person-type *exactly once* (yielding God$^2$) and if (ii) God$^1$ and God$^2$ interacted in 'the right kind' of ways, then that could itself bring about a further re-realisation of God$^1$. Let's call this potential third person *God*$^3$.

To see that CPR entails this, recall the Socially Realised Brain. In that case we have a group of individual human persons that engage in coordinated activities in ways that ensure the existence of a further person whose internal psychological and phenomenal states are just like that of some arbitrary human person. Let us alter the case somewhat to make it more applicable to trinitarian concerns:

> *Socially Realised Adam.* It is possible that an adult human person, Adam$^1$, is perfectly cloned a billion or so times. Each clone is an exact physical duplicate of Adam$^1$ at some time *t*. Because of this each clone realises a token-distinct instance *of Adam*$^1$*'s mind* at *t*. Each is given a residence somewhere on earth as well as the (shocking) knowledge of the fact that they are Adam$^1$ clones. After this, each clone of Adam$^1$ is given a part-time job: each spends a portion of their day interacting with the other clones with radio equipment by following instructions that allow them to collectively realise the type of functional organisation of that Adam$^1$'s brain realised at time *t*. In this way,

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> the population of clones collectively bring about a realisation of *one additional* token-distinct instance of Adam[1]'s mind at *t*. This clone has the same internal psychological and experiential states that Adam[1] had at *t*. Call this final instance of Adam[1]'s mind that results from the activity of the clones 'Adam[3]'.

The thing to keep in mind is that Socially Realised Adam is just a special instance of Socially Realised Brain. So if Socially Realised Brain is entailed by functionalism, so is Socially Realised Adam. Furthermore, if these are possibilities entailed by functionalism, then the following is likewise a possibility entailed by functionalism:

> *The Socially Realised God[3]*. There is a possible situation in which God[1] and God[2] engage each other in ways that bring about a realisation of a further, maximally accurate instance of God[1]'s person-type.

How could God[1] and God[2] 'engage' each other in ways that are capable of realising another instance of the mind of God[1]? One way would be to do it in the way it's done in the case of the Socially Realised Adam. A more traditional trinitarian approach could lean into the love motif noted in the introduction to this section. Perhaps God[1] and God[2] are drawn to each in love and decide to become a *we*, continuing their existence and activities in a profoundly close degree of communion and enjoyment of each other. Perhaps this would move them to participate moment-to-moment in infinitely many mental communicative acts that involve joint deliberation, joint preference ordering/negotiation, joint celebration of things worth celebrating, and mutual enjoyment of each other's company. The result of this activity could be such a profoundly complex performative agent that it actually brings about the realisation of another individual instance of God[1]'s person-type.[22] There are different stories one could tell. But here's the main point: if functionalism entails that individual persons can be produced through the activity of individual persons, then it follows that *it is possible* for God[1] and God[2] to intentionally engage each other in such a way that their joint activity re-realises God[1]'s person-type once again.[23]

Now, God[1] and God[2] are realised in the same divine system, so if the joint activity of God[1] and God[2] that yields God[3] were also to take place completely within that one divine system, then God[3] would himself be realised in that same system. Furthermore, God[3] would arguably inherit his knowledge, power, and rationality from God[1] and God[2]. Recall that God[3], on this view, is a re-realisation of the mind of God[1] that results from the mutual activity of God[1] and God[2]. This implies that when God[3] decides to act or plan or communicate, that will be a manifestation of the joint activity of God[1] and God[2] deciding to do so. In which case, God[1] and God[2] will also throw their power behind that decision. At the very least it is a logical possibility.

This explanation for the existence of God[3] raises a concern: if God[3] is a distinct person, what is to stop God[1] and God[2] from engaging God[3] in ways that realise a fourth divine person? There are at least two ways to address this issue. First, it could be a contingent matter that God[1] and God[2] do not engage God[3] in this way. In which case, the fact that God is tripersonal would be contingent. This is fully compatible with Weak Functionalist Trinitarianism.

But there is another way to address this issue. Take a *simple analogy* involving a very small corporate board, administrative group, or leadership team. Such groups may form performative (/collective, /group) persons. While they are far too simple to plausibly yield a further individual person the analogy will remain useful. So let *the Board* be a performative person that is made up of exactly two individual members: Mel and Meg. Now let us ask: can Mel (or Meg) interact with the Board? For example, can Mel interact with the group of

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which she is a part by bringing proposals to the Board for consideration, by arguing with the Board's past views, by challenging the Board's future plans, and so forth? Yes, obviously. But in order to do so Mel must either interact *with herself* or *with Meg*. But when Mel interacts with her group in this way, she does not bring forth any further performative persons even though she is interacting with the Board.

Now, the magnitude and variety of interactions between God[1] and God[2] that would be needed to bring about God[3] would be immense and for that reason quite different from the previous example just given. But there remains a way the divine case parallels the analogy to small performative persons. For suppose God[1] wants to, say, communicate something to God[3]. To do that, God[1] would have to interact with *that which realises God*[3]. But that would involve either interacting *with himself* or *with God*[2]. But why should God[1]'s interactions with himself or God[2] be expected to produce any additional individual beyond the individual those very kinds of interactions already produce, that is, God[3]? The very idea that they *could* is as strange as thinking that Mel's engagement with the Board generates a further performative person. Stranger still is the idea that such interactions *must* produce a fourth person. For it seems at least possible that such actions fail to do so. We can state the point here as an independently attractive conditional: if an individual person *x* results from the complex interpersonal interactions of some other people $y^1$-$y^n$, and $y^1$-$y^n$ only engage *x* by further interpersonal interactions with $y^1$-$y^n$, then it is possible that that activity does not yield any person in addition to *x*. Perhaps we could strengthen the consequent from a 'possibly not' claim to a 'cannot' claim. But the former is all that is needed to defend the consistency and conceivability of the functionalist account of the trinity.[24]

At this point we can appreciate the argument for Weak Functionalist Trinitarianism:

> *Weak Functionalist Trinitarianism*: If role-functionalism is both consistent and conceivable, then it is both consistent and conceivable that God is a single being who is exactly three distinct persons because there is one primary divine person who interacts with exactly one system-sharing re-realisation of his own person-type.

We have, at this point, provided evidence for a conditional resolution to the inconsistency and intelligibility aspects of the trinitarian trilemma. That is, conditional on a suitable version of functionalism being both consistent and conceivable, there is a consistent and conceivable functionalist version of trinitarian monotheism.

## A concluding concern

A referee observed that functionalists generally point to *composite* substances (like brains) as that which instantiates person-types – where composite substances are wholes with proper parts. But the traditional trinitarian view is that the divine substance is simple, lacking proper parts. This raises a question whether the functionalist approach to the trinity fits with the simplicity of the divine substance.[25] I'll make two points in response. The first point is about 'keeping good company' while the second point is about what evidence there is that functionalist trinitarianism is at least logically consistent with the simplicity of the divine substance.

While functionalist trinitarianism is distinct from existing views of the trinity it has important structural similarities to the prominent *constitution view* of the trinity defended by Rea (2020) and Brower and Rea (2005). They write that:

> ...the Persons of the Trinity can also be conceived of in terms of hylomorphic compounds. Thus, we can think of *the divine essence* [substance] as playing the role of matter; and we can regard the properties *being a Father, being a Son*, and *being a Spirit*

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> as *distinct forms instantiated by the divine essence, each giving rise to a distinct Person.* As in the case of matter, moreover, we can regard the divine essence not as an individual thing in its own right but rather as that which, together with the requisite 'form', constitutes a Person. Each Person will then be a compound structure whose matter is the divine essence and whose form is one of the three distinctive Trinitarian properties. On this way of thinking, the Persons of the Trinity are directly analogous to particulars that stand in the familiar relation of material constitution. (Brower & Rea 2005, 68–69; cf. Rea 2020: 215–216 emphasis added)

According to the functionalist view of the trinity defended above there is *one divine system* (substance, essence) that instantiates three token-distinct functional organisations, *where each organisation gives rise to a token-distinct divine person*. This similarity between the constitution view and functionalist trinitarianism should not be surprising. For it has been argued that functionalism just is a hylomorphic account of the mind, where our minds are owed to the form of our brains much like our fists are owed to the form of our hands (cf. Grim 2008, 13). Indeed, many credit Aristotle himself with the view that minds are hylomorphic compounds in a way that can be read as a prototype of recent functionalism.[26] While there are these similarities between the functionalist theory developed in previous sections and Brower and Rea's approach, the functionalist theory is firmly anchored in the philosophy of mind and provides details where Brower and Rea left their view at a relatively high level of abstraction.

The possibility that this paper's functionalist account of the trinity is but one instance of Brower and Rea's constitution view of the trinity will surely raise further questions. But for present purposes it doesn't matter if the functionalist account is *in fact* a specific instance of their general kind of account, or if the functionalist account is *only very similar* to their account. What matters is the high degree of similarity. For it is this degree of similarity that supports the following modest point with regard to the question of the simplicity of God's substance:

> *Common Company*. If a constitution view of the trinity is consistent with the divine substance being simple, then the functionalist account of the trinity will *likely* also be consistent with the divine substance being simple; and if a constitution view of the trinity requires that the divine substance be composite, then the functionalist account of the trinity will *likely* also require this.

As far as I can tell, Brower and Rea provide hints that their model of the trinity is (as they envision it) consistent with either view of the divine substance, but they are light on details.[27]

Here's my second remark on this issue. There is at least *some* reason to think that the functionalist and the constitutionalist approaches to the trinity can preserve the simplicity of the divine substance. Martin Pickup (2016) has given a consistent metaphysical model of the trinity in which the distinct persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) share a single simple substance. Pickup's model begins from the notion of spatially extended simples (objects that occupy multiple regions of space while lacking proper parts). Imagine an extended simple rod R which occupies several continuous points in space S1...Sn. R may instantiate a range of properties. For example, it may instantiate a colour property such that it's red where it is located in the left-half of S1...Sn, but blue where it is located in the right-half of S1...Sn. But we cannot say that *R's left-half is red* since R is an extended simple. It has no halves and is best described as instantiating an 'irreducibly distributional property of being red-and-blue-in-the-appropriate-ways' (Pickup 2016, 435).

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Pickup then introduces a notion of 'person-space' analogous to physical space, where person-space is the space of possible persons (person-types), and each occupied point in person-space is a person (Pickup 2016, 421). He argues for the consistency of the idea that 'the single and simple entity that is God is located at three distinct points of person-space', where each occupied point corresponds to a distinct person of the trinity (Pickup 2016, 424). Since we are not forbidden from interpreting the relation of occupancy in person-space as requiring *a substance to instantiate a person-type*, Pickup's model of the trinity can be taken as evidence for the consistency of the idea that a simple divine substance occupies three points in person-space in virtue of instantiating three distinct divine person-types.[28]

This provides evidence that the functionalist account of the trinity is logically consistent with the simplicity of the divine substance. For Pickup's model of the trinity is argued to be consistent with the idea that (i) the Son depends on the Father while the Spirit depends on both (Pickup 2016, 429), and his model also appears consistent with (ii) the members of the trinity being able to interact with each other, and (iii) the idea that each member of the trinity themselves hosts various mental states (beliefs, preferences, intentions, conscious states, etc.) that stand in various psychological dependency relations to each other.[29] Now, if it's logically possible for the dependency relations in (i)–(iii) to be instantiated by a simple divine substance, then it also seems logically possible for *other* dependency relations to be instantiated by the same simple divine substance. For example, it's consistent with Pickup's model that the psychological dependency relations among each person's mental states are instantiated in virtue of the instantiation of the non-psychological dependency relations characteristic of the functional organisation types that realise person-types. It is, at any rate, unclear what principle would allow us to say that the simple divine substance can instantiate the robust dependency relations in (i)–(iii) but not instantiate the non-psychological dependency relations that functionalists identify as realisers. But what is most important for present purposes is that *conditional on functionalism* we should not expect there to be any such principle. For functionalism entails that points in person-space can be occupied by a substance only if it instantiates a functional organisation type that realises a person-type.

So provided we lack sufficient reason to think (i)-(iii) are inconsistent with Pickup's model or functionalism, we may draw a modest conclusion: there is noteworthy evidence for the logical consistency of a version of functionalist trinitarianism that takes the divine substance to be simple and yet capable of instantiating the properties necessary for realising the person-types of God[1], God[2], and God[3]. Perhaps, this will be unsurprising in the end. For Pickup himself says that 'Points in person-space…*are not entities*. This may be unpalatable to some: they may be disconcerted that we can, using the term "Father," refer not to an entity but *to a way of being a person*'. Pickup called this a cost (2016, 435). But this is very close to the functionalist idea that persons are not substances, but *ways for substances to be*. Far from a cost, functionalists will find this a virtue.[30]

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## Notes

1. The qualifier 'jointly maximal' is to be read as implying that some attributes might (but might not) impose limitations on others. Talk of 'maximal knowledge', 'maximal power', or 'maximal rationality' below is always

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to be understood in relation to joint maximality. See Nagasawa (2017) for references and exploration of issues associated with this and related conceptions of God. Further, being maximally benevolent will be treated as a consequence of *being maximally rational*, which – among other things – has to do with never failing to respond to one's total set of reasons as one ought to. God's reasons include his practical reasons, his epistemic reasons, his reasons to respond to others with benevolence, and whatever other reasons he might have. (This implies nothing about what his reasons depend on.) So maximal rationality, when thus construed, can be taken to imply maximal benevolence, and more besides.

**2.** On its inconsistency, see Beall (2023; 2021, Ch. 6). On its unintelligibility relative to different models, see Howard-Snyder (2015) and, especially, Tuggy's (2024) articulations of criticisms of existing models of the trinity. On its lack of philosophical motivation, see footnote 5.

**3.** For such metaphysical defences of the trinity see van Inwagen (2003), Brower and Rea (2005), Merricks (2006), Leftow (2012), Hasker (2013), Pickup (2016), Kleinschmidt (2018), Koons (2018), and Mooney (2021). For further references and critical discussion see McCall and Rea (2009) and Tuggy (2024).

**4.** Beall (2021, Ch. 6). Compare with Cotnoir and Beall (2017).

**5.** For recent comments on this tendency see Tuggy (2024, §2.3), Williams (2024), and Baber (2025, §1.a). See also Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (P.1, Q.12, A.4), who affirms the inability to provide evidence for the trinity through reason alone. There are exceptions to this, e.g., Layman (2016, 153–157) and Swinburn (1994, 419–422) seek to fortify trinitarian monotheism with *a priori* evidence. See Lebens and Tuggy (2019), Leftow (1999), and Tuggy (2015) for criticisms of their attempts to provide *a priori* evidence for it. For a new a priori approach to the undermotivation objection see Silva Jr (ms.).

**6.** 'Conceivable' rather than 'intelligible' is used because the two are generally interchangeable, with the notion of conceivability enjoying the benefit of systematic disambiguation and philosophical exploration. See Chalmers (2002), who outlines a variety of notions of conceivability in terms of the inability to detect contradictions under different and increasingly demanding epistemic conditions.

**7.** For an early statement of this see Putnam (1975, 293). For discussion of the realisation relation as the relation of instantiating functions see Polger and Shapiro (2016, Ch. 2).

**8.** See van Gulick (2009) and Levin (2023) for references and further discussion.

**9.** Chalmers (1996), Block (2007), Churchland (2005), van Gulick (2009), Polger and Shapiro (2016), Levin (2023), and Polger (2024).

**10.** The lower-level properties are typically non-mental properties. But as we'll see in a later section, sometimes mental properties (e.g., the interaction of personal minds) realise mental states.

**11.** For defence of the idea that non-composite (simple) substances can instantiate multiple distinct mental states and even whole persons see Pickup (2016). See also the final section.

**12.** Notions of personhood along these lines arguably stretch back to Boethius (1968, §3) in discussions of the trinity (cf. Swinburne 2018, 421), and they resonate with the commonly cited Lockean conception of personhood on which a person is 'a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places' (Locke 1975, 335). For more on the concept of personhood in early Christian philosophical theology see Williams (2019).

**13.** For example, the ability to acquire reasons, the ability to evaluate the weight of one's reasons, and the ability to respond to one's reasons. For the most part, these are purely mental abilities since acquiring/possessing reasons is typically treated as being in some kind of mental state, as is having an evaluation of their weight. Responding to reasons often involves the formation of intentions or other sub-personal mental acts that produce actions, some of which may be purely mental actions while others may involve one's body. For more on reasons, their possession, and responding to them see Lord (2018).

**14.** See Plantinga (1974) for more on broadly logical necessity. For a pathway into relevant discussions of God's possible epistemic limitations see Grim (1985), Williams (2019), Nagasawa (2017), and Zagzebski (2023).

**15.** Silva Jr (2023), Sylvan (2018), and Turri (2018).

**16.** Jonathan Edwards (1740/2008, 117) seemed to hold that it could. But as Swinburne (2018, 435 fn.8) obliquely, but rightly, points out in relation to other psychological models of the trinity, *persons* are the kinds of things that have rational powers: they can receive reasons, they can assess the weight of reasons, and they can act in response to reasons. But *mere collections* of mental states do not come to possess new reasons by expanding *their* knowledge since collections of mental states don't know anything. Mere collections of mental states do not have the capacity *to deliberatively weigh* reasons, as such weighing involves *reasoning* and reasoning is a *mental act* not realisable by a mere collection of mental states. It is *persons* (i.e., *those who have* representational mental states) that have these powers.

**17.** It's commonly thought that knowing-how to φ in a situation *s* and being able to φ in *s* come apart. A gymnast with a broken leg may know how to do a perfect backflip. But they will be unable to do so in such situations (Stanley & Williamson 2001; Boylan 2024).

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**18.** Enderton (1977, Ch. 6; 141), Jech (1997, Ch. 5, 49), and Oppy (2009). In the end the application of this mathematical point may require refinement. In ZFC there is no largest infinite cardinal; for every cardinal κ, there is a strictly larger one. Hence ZFC does not recognise any 'highest order of infinity'. If one proposes to model the divine mind by appeal to a 'highest' infinity, one would need resources beyond ZFC. So, assuming God's mind would be better modelled in relation to facts pertaining to the highest order of infinity, these results from ZFC serve at best as inductive evidence that a parallel fact holds in relation to the highest order of infinity. Thanks to W. William for pointing this out to me.

**19.** While actual infinite collections are standardly assumed to exist in the mathematical domain (Oppy 2009), actual infinite collections of contingent physical objects raise concerns (Craig 1979). But God is not a contingent physical object.

**20.** Can two instances of one kind of person be instantiated in a single system without collapsing into a single functional organisation? Nothing in role-functionalism forbids multiple realisations of person-kinds within one system (think Jekyll and Hyde again). Indeed, one would think that if any system could do this, it would be *the divine system*, which has the capacity to realise a being as vast, complex, and powerful as God$^1$. There is no clear or principled pressure towards 'organisational collapse' in the divine case. And cases much less divine could be called upon for illustration, e.g., our computers can and do run multiple token distinct instances of the same program.

**21.** For further discussion of the qualities of such persons see List and Pettit (2011, Ch. 8). The appeal to performative persons in discussions of trinitarianism is not new. McIntosh (2016) has defended the view that the Father, Son, and Spirit are each individual persons that jointly form a performative person owing to their joint interaction. McIntosh's aim was not, however, to address the trinitarian trilemma. His aim was to explain how it could be possible for social trinitarians to claim that God is a person.

**22.** It can help at this point to consider a computing analogy. Imagine two large language models, ChatGPT and Claude, instantiated as numerically distinct programs on the same hardware system. Call them 'ChatGPT$^1$' and 'Claude$^1$'. Suppose they are programmed to communicate with each other via a rule-governed channel, maintain a shared ledger of provisional claims and reasons, and implement a decision protocol that yields a single answer to each user query. Suppose users may query ChatGPT$^1$ alone, Claude$^1$, or their joint interface. The joint interface presents as a system-level LLM and is distinct from each component LLM (ChatGPT$^1$ and Claude$^1$) taken alone and that it's the organised whole whose activities are fixed by the decision protocol, shared ledger, and related activities of ChatGPT$^1$ and Claude$^1$. The system-level LLM inherits many of the capacities of ChatGPT$^1$ and Claude$^1$, e.g., memory, text analysis, natural-language generation, etc., and thus the joint interface does not merely present as a system-level LLM, it *is* a third token LLM. But it is a token LLM that is realised in the interaction of the first two that takes place in one hardware system. Now replace Claude$^1$ with: a second instance of ChatGPT$^1$ that results from ChatGPT$^1$ replicating itself. Call it ChatGPT$^2$. In this version of the analogy, we will have three numerically distinct LLMs, each of which is an instance of the same kind of LLM, i.e., ChatGPT$^1$. For some, this may be a helpful analogy of the functionalist account of the third person of the trinity that is being developed here.

**23.** Bear in mind, the issue here is not one of perfect duplication. For x to be a *perfect duplicate* of y is, in part, for x and y to be numerically distinct individuals who share as many properties as possible while remaining numerically distinct. Such distinct individuals are qualitatively identical to the highest degree. Decrease the number of shared properties and you decrease the degree of qualitative identity. The claim made in this paper is not that God$^2$ and God$^3$ are perfect duplicates of God$^1$. Rather, God$^1$, God$^2$, and God$^3$ are *type-identical at the level of persons*: they instantiate the same person-level functional organisation. That is consistent with their hosting many distinct mental states, which is why they need not be perfect duplicates.

**24.** One referee suggested that this view would imply that God$^1$ and God$^2$ do not love God$^3$ or do not stand in the same kind of intimate relationship with God$^3$. Jonathan Edwards (1740/2008, 129–141) noticed a similar concern with his own view of the trinity, and addressed it as follows (1740/2008, 140): 'God [the father] is never said to love the Holy Ghost nor are any epithets that betoken love anywhere given to Him, tho so many are ascribed to the Son, as God's Elect, The Beloved, He in Whom God's soul delights, He in Whom He is well pleased, etc. Yea such epithets seem to be ascribed to the Son as tho He were the object of love exclusive of all other persons, as tho there were no person whatsoever to share the love of the Father with the Son. To this purpose evidently He is called God's Only Begotten Son, at the time that it is added, "In Whom He is well pleased." There is nothing in Scripture that speaks of any acceptance of the Holy Ghost or any reward or any mutual friendship between the Holy Ghost and either of the other Persons, or any command to love the Holy Ghost or to delight in or have any complacence in [the Holy Ghost], tho such commands are so frequent with respect to the other Persons.'

**25.** The referee also argued that to deny the tradition at this point is likely to invite Grim-style Cantorian paradoxes (Grim 2000).

**26.** See Putnam (1975, 302) and Nussbaum (1978). For critical discussion of those who interpret Aristotle in this way see Cohen (1995).

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**27.** Brower and Rea require that their account be 'consistent with the view that God is an individual rather than a society, and that the Persons are not parts of God' (2005, 59), and they describe the divine essence merely as 'a substrate for the Persons' that is 'one in number with God' (2005, 75). They say nothing here about whether that essence is mereologically simple, so their official formulation seems neutral on the simplicity of the divine substance. However, while writing on Abelard's view of the trinity in relation to the constitution view, Brower (2004, 239) indicates that a constitution model like the one he develops with Rea would be 'perfectly compatible' with divine simplicity provided simplicity is understood in terms of God's substance lacking parts, rather than in Abelard's preferred sense in which there are no forms or properties in God at all.

**28.** I've claimed that there is one person-type, $God^1$'s person-type, that is realised three times over in the trinity. But can a single person-point be thrice occupied? Pickup view allows that the points of person-space are fine-grained so that there can be multiple points in person-space that are similar enough to each other that each distinct point can be regarded as an instance of some coarse-grained person-type. This would allow the functionalist trinitarian who wants to employ Pickup's work to say that $God^1$, $God^2$, and $God^3$ are each instances of the slightly coarser-grained person-type associated with $God^1$ while, nevertheless, maintaining that each is a fine-grained instance that differs from $God^1$ in the sorts of psychological respects already noted.

**29.** Here's a quick illustration of such psychological dependency relations. $God^1$ may *intend* to do A because: he *believes* doing A will bring about outcome O1, while doing A2 will bring about O2. And while he *desires* both O1 and O2, he *prefers* O1 over O2. In this case, $God^1$'s intention depends on his beliefs, desires, and preferences.

**30.** Pickup (2016, 434) does resist one version of a 'constitution' view: one on which it is *the points in person-space* (the three persons of the trinity) that constitute the divine substance. But *that* is not the kind of constitution claim at issue in this section.

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