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Divine deception and monotheism: a reply to Hasker

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Abstract: **In two recent pieces William Hasker argues that my arguments against Social Trinitarianism fail. I argue here that he hasn't successfully refuted or rebutted them, and that his response to the quaternity problem sacrifices monotheism.**

My arguments against 'Social' Trinitarianism[1] [hereafter ST] have met a formidable opponent.[2] However, I shall argue that Hasker's replies are wide of the mark. Most recently, in this journal, Hasker thinks that he's found a simple reason to dismiss them. In essence, he says that my arguments assume that any Trinitarian must read occurrences of 'God', 'Yahweh', or 'the Father' as referring to the (entire) Trinity. But, due to progressive revelation, this usage developed only later.[3] I'm at a loss as to how this linguistic point undermines any of the three arguments, as nothing in those arguments presupposes that a Trinitarian must take all occurrences of 'God' (etc.) to refer to the Trinity.

The real core of Hasker's objection is found in his earlier, longer treatment. He first addresses what I've called the quaternity problem.[4] ST says that each of the three persons of the Trinity is a divine self. What then of the one God, which is supposed to be in *some* sense all three of them together? If God's also a divine self, we have four divine selves, not three. And if 'God' is not a divine self – is this theism (i.e. monotheism) at all?

Hasker seizes the second horn of the dilemma. Given that the three persons fully co-operate, have full access to each others' states of mind, and can't possibly disagree, he asks, 'is it not perfectly reasonable and appropriate to *say* of the Trinity as a whole that "God thinks … ", 'God has decided … ", … and so on? And is this not sufficient for one who *says* these things to qualify as a theist?'[5] No-one denies that it can be natural and unobjectionable for us to personify groups of selves. But being a theist is a matter of what one believes, not a matter

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of how one speaks. It isn't sufficient for being a theist that one holds it to be in some sense permissible or desirable to speak of the Ultimate in terms usually reserved for selves. If it were, Śaṅkara, John Hick, and medieval Indian Buddhists would be theists.[6] And it is mere table-pounding to insist that one who answers 'No' to one or both of Hasker's questions above is '"merely theistic" rather than Trinitarian and Christian!'[7]

Who thinks that God is (literally) a self? Prima facie, anyone who applies personal pronouns to God, or who ascribes qualities to God which imply being a self, such as having knowledge or performing an intentional action. An eminent *Christian* philosopher has explained theism as 'the belief in a personal God who is the Creator of the world', suggesting that this being can 'really care for us, have a plan for our lives, hear and answer our prayers … [and] save us from our own wrongdoing'.[8] I'm aware that for a host of reasons, intellectuals within the Christian tradition have denied that God is a person/self/thinking thing/intelligent agent.[9] But evidently Hasker and I are not among them. Like countless Christians, once we've formed an abstract enough concept of a self, which doesn't imply being physical, limited, created, corruptible, human, etc., it seems obvious to us that the one called 'God' (etc.) by Abraham, Jesus, and Paul – this 'Father' who is jealous, makes plans, loves us – is a self. Or at least, I and Hasker-outside-of-Trinity-discussions agree that God is a self. His shifting the subject to language suggests that he concedes that the one 'God' (the Trinity) isn't a self, though it can be spoken of *as if* it were a self.[10]

Here we have another wrongful deception problem, this time by ST theorists. (Hasker is far from alone here.)[11] They *know* that continually using singular personal pronouns for God signals to *most* people (Christian and otherwise) that one holds God to be a self, and not merely to resemble one. Moreover, theologians have lamented that the average pew-dweller is really a unitarian, or nearly so, and some have noted the prevalence of modalistic views of the Trinity[12] among the theologically aware as well as among average lay people. Thus, these ST theorists think that it is a *serious error* to hold God to be a self. And they hold that *many* are prone to this error. And with these beliefs, they deliberately, as a matter of course, speak as if God were a self! Why? Because it sounds ridiculous to say, of 'God' that 'they love us'. This is because the Bible *uniformly* portrays God as a self, in countless ways. I say, let them speak plainly, and deal with any controversy that may follow. After all, 'No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light.'[13]

It is not, in general, misleading to personify, to speak of something which isn't a self as if it were. But it most cases, people are not already inclined to think that the thing being personified is literally a self. Again, while the ST theorist may insist that she's merely personifying, in saying, for example that 'God knows a lot', she should concede that most people and most Christians, in talking about God, are not employing that figure of speech.

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But are we, of necessity, applying terms analogically? Appealing to the mainstream tradition, Hasker asserts that our 'starting and default position should be that all of the key terms used in the doctrine [of the Trinity] are analogical'.[14] We could hold this if we had reason to think that *any* term which properly applies to God does so only analogically – that is, with a meaning somewhat different from but related to its meaning in mundane contexts. This point needs to be argued for, *if* Hasker wants to make it.[15] If we don't know this in general about God-talk, then why should we think that God-talk concerning the Trinity must be wholly analogical? Following Alston, I'm convinced that this general claim is false; in brief, some terms express abstract concepts, which are so general as to be satisfied by beings as different as God and David Hasselhoff – terms like 'being', 'intentional agent', 'knower', 'friend', and 'self'.[16]

But let's suppose with Hasker that all terms applicable to the Trinity are applicable only analogically.[17] Suppose, then, that words like 'he' and 'himself' apply to God analogically – as meaning something different from, but not *wholly* different from what they mean when applied to humans, aliens, or angels. And by 'God' and 'the Trinity' we mean a group of three divine selves, equally divine, eternally and necessarily united in friendship, and also related by 'perichoresis'. We can truly say, of this group of selves, that 'He loves us'. Normally, we infer from a use of 'he' that its referent is an intelligent thing, a self. But when we see that *all* terms applied to the Trinity are analogically applied, we have to question all such inferences. For the claim is that the referent doesn't satisfy our normal concept, but only some other concept which is somehow related to the normal one.

Thus, Hasker might say that we can infer that the referent of 'he' here is a unity, and one which is self-like, and to which various personal terms may be (analogically) applied. But we can't infer that there's something it's like to be this being, or that it (literally) *feels* any way towards us. Again, we could truly say that 'The Trinity is a god, in fact, the only god.' The word 'god' here would be applicable only analogically, for a 'god' is literally (roughly) a provident, powerful being which in some sense ought to be worshipped, and this can only be a self (only a self can intentionally control goings on in the cosmos, or be properly honoured, submitted to, appeased). On the Trinity theory at hand, there are three of these. But now this is strange – the Christian God is a being (or group) such that the term 'god' applies only analogically to it? Our 'God' isn't literally a god, but is instead *somewhat like* one?

The monotheist and polytheist disagree about how many gods there are, not about how many things there are to which the word 'god' may in various ways be applied. The ST theorist who claims that 'God' is a group of three divine selves is siding with the latter, however much she wants to speak with the former. She may use the word 'god' as she likes; she may say it is only analogically related to any non-Christian usage. This may mislead many folk, but in any case, what makes

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her a polytheist is that she believes in three of what most of us would call, speaking literally, 'gods', thus, in three gods. Though she redefines 'god', that word already has a meaning, and the rest of us will go on using it. So, we'll think it obvious that 'God' in the Bible is supposed to be a *god*. This is implied by His being *the only* god.

In this piece Hasker attempts to sit on the fence as to whether or not the three persons constitute one thing, using the weasel-term 'unity' for what the three in *some* sense amount to or make up.[18] He suggests that *if* a case can be made for 'an objective, metaphysical unity between the persons', then it will be all the more appropriate to attribute personal qualities to God (the whole Trinity) 'without any need for a literal merging of persons into a single super-person'.[19] I don't think that this follows – personification is personification, whether of a group of selves or of a non-self which somehow consists of selves – either way, it's describing a non-self *as if* it were a self.

But what, finally, is the substance of Hasker's reply? It amounts to a plausible story about the progressive revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity. At an earlier time, people used 'God' to refer to Yahweh, the one true God and Father of Jesus. Later,

> … both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are revealed as divine beings … . And this, if not simply contradictory, is clearly tritheistic – and clearly unacceptable. So there is an inexorable pressure to bring the Son and Spirit 'within the circle of divinity' – to say that the 'one God' comprises not only the Father, but also the Son and the Spirit.[20]

Since, then, 'God' can be used either for the Father, or for 'the Trinity as a whole'.[21] Here, then, is the moral of the story:

> What this comes to is that the assertion 'Yahweh, the one and only God, is the Father of Jesus,' should be seen, not as a divinely-revealed identity statement (as Tuggy would have it), but rather as *a particular stage in the development of the Christian understanding of God* – a development which culminated in the doctrine of the Trinity. Once we have seen this, the problems raised by his arguments disappear.[22]

Hasker rightly aims at the third argument as the most important of the three, and he diagnoses the problem as the third step, which says that Yahweh and the Father are numerically one.[23] But this follows from the first two premises, which say that Yahweh is numerically identical with God and that God is numerically identical with the Father. Which, then, of these does Hasker deny? I don't see that he denies either. His theory requires him to deny the second premise – that God is numerically identical with the Father; and here his theory contradicts the New Testament.[24] But so far, Hasker has only changed the subject to language; he urges that 'Father' and 'Yahweh' used to be co-referential, but now our habits of language have changed, so that this is no longer so.

His appeal to progressive revelation bears all the weight. Hasker tells a story according to which, at an early stage of revelation, God informs us that God is the

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Father. And then at a later stage, God adds the information that God is the Son and that God is the Spirit. It's not clear what all these *is*'s amount to for Hasker, but the point is that there's one being, a self, about whom we progressively gain more and more information. But as I made clear in the article, the Social Trinitarian we're talking about can't assume that there is any one personal subject about whom we learn more and more.[25] Hasker contentiously portrays this situation as one *explicitly* where the latter-day information 'shows us a God *whose* life is richer and more complex than we could otherwise imagine. … no sensible theologian supposes that God has *acted* whimsically or without good and sufficient reason in making *his self*-revelation gradual'.[26]

Hasker helps himself here to the idea that the Trinity is both a thing and a self. It is a who, and so a he (if you like, a 's/he' or a 'she'), and he has his reasons when it comes to how he reveals himself, and so he's well within his rights in doing so slowly. Thus, Hasker can't sit on the fence in the way noted above. His story about progressive revelation requires the one God to be a self – and so not merely a 'unity', but an entity as well, and evidently a complex one. Worse, as we've seen, his ST denies this crucial element of the story; on it, 'God' resembles, but is not a self.

On the assumption that 'God' names a mere group of selves, or even an entity which has selves as parts but is not itself a self, the two deception arguments seem as strong as ever. Hasker, at best, shows that these two arguments wouldn't obviously apply to some *other* version of the Trinity doctrine, on which the Trinity itself is both a thing and a self. But such a Trinity would not be numerically identical with the Father (because, however this theory is spelled out, those two will qualitatively differ), and so this theory stands refuted by my third, biblical argument. Further, it would seem to present a quaternity.

I hold, as I think any Christian must, to the doctrine of progressive revelation; Hasker mistakenly fingers denial of this doctrine as a source of my deception arguments.[27] But progressive revelation needn't involve wrongful deception (first and second arguments) or contradicting a central teaching of the Christian Bible (third, 'direct' argument).

In correspondence, Hasker suggests a different story, one unencumbered by appeal to any strong analogy doctrine:

> I think the observation that 'God' in Scripture normally refers to the Father does answer the 'deception' argument. In this case, we no longer have three individuals, all pretending to be a single fictional person. Rather, there is, so to speak, a single divine being who has not yet formally introduced us to his equally divine colleagues.[28]

But this is hardly a way out of deception concerns, for this god (and/or one or both of his colleagues?) thunders through various prophets that he's the *only* god.

In sum, the three arguments stand against any ST on which the one 'God' isn't a self. And the third argument refutes any Trinity theory which denies that the

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Father is one and the same as the one God of Israel. At least Hasker's work clarifies that we must choose between ST and monotheism.[29]

Notes

1. Principally the three arguments in my 'Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism', *Religious Studies*, **40** (2004), 269–287, and to a lesser extent those in my 'The unfinished business of Trinitarian theorizing', *Religious Studies*, **39** (2003), 165–183, and 'Tradition and believability: Edward Wierenga's Social Trinitarianism', *Philosophia Christi*, **5** (2003), 447–456. Of the three aforementioned arguments, the first and second turn on what appear to be cases of wrongful deception, and the third 'direct' argument turns on the Bible's implicit identification of the one God, the Father of Jesus, and Yahweh.
2. William Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', in T. McCall and M. Rea (eds) *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38–51; *idem* 'Objections to Social Trinitarianism', *Religious Studies*, **46** (2010), 421–439.
3. Hasker 'Objections to Social Trinitarianism', **423–424**.
4. Tuggy 'Unfinished business of Trinitarian theorizing', 168–169. Brevity forces me to forgo responding to his 'methodological precepts'; Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', 43–46. Of these, I see only the third as truly relevant; I argue briefly against it below.
5. Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', 47, emphases added.
6. On this last, I have in mind the authors of the third- to ninth-century Indian doctrinal digests analysed in Paul Griffiths *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1994), ch. 7.
7. Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', 47.
8. William Hasker *Metaphysics: Constructing a World View* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 114. In the last part of the quotation he's talking of what *isn't* true of the 'God' of pantheism, but I take it that the contrasts imply that the 'God' of theism *does* have those features. Cf. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, & David Basinger *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd edn (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.
9. These, together with reasons to believe that God is a self, are surveyed in Charles Taliaferro 'Personal', in Brian Davies (ed), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), 95–105.
10. This is confirmed by what Hasker says elsewhere; in his view, the one God is not literally a self. See my 'Hasker's quests for a viable social theory' (forthcoming).
11. Paul Copan 'Is the Trinity a logical blunder? God as three and one', in Paul Copan & William Lane Craig (eds), *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists and Other Objectors* (Nashville TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 205–217, 206; Thomas McCall *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 33–37, 92–94; William Lane Craig, 'Trinity monotheism once more: a response to Daniel Howard-Snyder', *Philosophia Christi*, **8** (2006), 101–113, reprinted as 'Another glance at Trinity monotheism', in McCall & Rea *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, 126–130.
12. That is, theories on which there is exactly one divine self, the 'three persons' being his modes of acting, interacting, revealing, or living, etc.
13. Luke, 8.16, English Standard Version.
14. Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', 45, n. 9.
15. It is not clear to me that he does; does he not apply the term 'person' (meaning a self, not a human being) non-analogically to each member of the Trinity?; Hasker 'Objections to Social Trinitarianism', 422.
16. William Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), ch. 3.
17. Carl Mosser notes that 'social' theorists are actually quite divided on this point; Carl Mosser 'Fully Social Trinitarianism', in McCall & Rea *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, 131–150, 135–138. This undermines Hasker's appeal to 'Christian common sense' to support his claim about analogy.
18. Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', 49.

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19. *Ibid.*, 47–48.
20. *Ibid.*, 48.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
23. The third, direct argument is:'Let y name Yahweh, the one true God presented in the Old Testament. Let g be the God of the New Testament. Let f be the Father of Jesus Christ, and s and h be the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, respectively.

    (1) $y=g$
    (2) $g=f$
    (3) $y=f$
    (4) $f\neq(f, s, h)$
    (5) $g\neq(f, s, h)$
    (6) $y\neq(f, s, \text{h})$';

    Tuggy 'Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism', 284.

    The symbol ' = ' means numerical identity, and the notation (f, s, h) is supposed to refer to 'the Trinity as a whole' – to all three persons, or the set, sum, or thing they compose, if any. I might instead have used 't' to be either a name referring to the Trinity (this assumes it to be an entity) or a plural referring term, which refers to f, s, and h (this doesn't assume that group to compose any entity), which would make the last three steps in the argument read:

    (4) $f\neq t$
    (5) $g\neq t$
    (6) $y\neq t$.

24. To clarify, I don't claim that any of the premises has been *explicitly* revealed. I do claim that they are clearly presupposed throughout the New Testament, and are implicitly taught therein. They are things that in the New Testament era went without saying. Those assuming $g=f$ include John, 17.1–3, 20.17, and Ephesians, 1.2–3, 16–17. Those assuming $y=g$ include Acts, 3.13, John, 8.54, and Hebrews 1.1–2.
25. Tuggy 'Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism', 273.
26. Hasker 'Has a Trinitarian God deceived us?', 49–50, emphases added.
27. *Ibid.*, 50.
28. E-mail to the author of 23 December 2009. I take it that Hasker has in mind all three arguments.
29. I thank Bill Hasker for helpful correspondence and comments on a previous, longer draft of this paper, and Peter Byrne for his comments on the penultimate draft.

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