

RESEARCH ARTICLE

John Owen as proto-social trinitarian? Reinterpreting Owen and resisting a recent trend

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Abstract

Contrary to much of the recent literature on the trinitarian theology of John Owen, which often ascribes radical personal distinction to his account of triune relations and actions, this paper argues that Owen's account of distinct divine persons and trinitarian actions ought not to be contrasted with his theological forebears: Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Calvin. Instead, his account of trinitarian ontology and operation is thoroughly consistent with (and dependent upon) the Augustinian principles that these interpreters suspect Owen is rejecting. The argument unfolds by presenting four putative points of strong personal distinction in John Owen's trinitarian theology and then reinterpreting each of the themes and passages that these four points are supposedly rooted in, evidencing his Augustinian account of trinitarian unity and distinction.

Keywords: appropriations; covenant of redemption; indivisible operations; John Owen; social trinitarianism; Trinity

As the author of a volume titled, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, John Owen is often said to 'radically distinguish the operations of the divine persons' in his trinitarian theology, giving it 'obvious social elements' through his articulation of the distinct acts of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹ The strong personal distinction in his trinitarian theology is said to be 'Cappadocian' (in contrast to 'classic Latin Trinitarian doctrine'), to have an 'Eastern feel', and to draw from Cappadocian trinitarian theology 'an ecclesiology [of "freely relating persons"] which echoes God's eternal being in relation'.²

¹This is vol. 2 of *The Works of John Owen* [hereafter *WJO*], 24 vols, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Johnston & Hunter 1850–5). Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (New York: OUP, 2016), pp. 172–3; Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 159. There is, admittedly, an obvious, superficial linguistic connection between Owen's work in texts like *Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* and the modern accounts of 'persons in communion' by social trinitarians like Catherine Mowry LaCugna and John Zizioulas.

²Robert Letham, 'John Owen's Doctrine of the Trinity in its Catholic Context', in Kelly Kopic and Mark Jones (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 191; idem, 'The Trinity between East and West', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009), p. 52; idem, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian &

Interpreters such as Brian Kay suggest that Owen's trinitarian theology is in an 'uneasy position with the long tradition in western theology that emphasizes the absolute unity of action among the divine persons'; instead, Kay suggests, Owen emphasises 'nearly the opposite point'.³ These accounts contrast Owen's understanding of trinitarian distinction with the trinitarian unity present in the theologies of Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin.⁴ Illustrative of the supposed strength of Owen's account of trinitarian distinction, some even suggest that, if readers do not interpret Owen carefully, then they could 'accuse him of tritheism', or at least 'brushing very close' to it.⁵ Many of these interpreters view Owen's understanding of strong personal distinction to be a positive theological development, foreshadowing certain elements of social or relational trinitarianism – minimally understood as a theory in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have 'distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action'.⁶

My contention is that Owen's trinitarian distinctions ought to be read in continuity (not contrast) with the western, or Latin, tradition of Augustine, Thomas and Calvin.⁷ That is, rather than standing as the predecessor to social trinitarianism, I contend that Owen is a proponent of the Augustinian tradition. In order to motivate the question and judiciously represent the extant social-leaning interpretation, I will first provide the evidence within Owen's doctrine of the Trinity that supposedly inclines in a social direction. These four points also frequently serve as distinguishing elements in social, or relational, models of the Trinity. Namely, (1) a prioritisation of personal distinction *ad intra*, (2) distinct personal wills in God, (3) distinct actions of the divine persons and

Reformed, 2004), p. 409; Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd edn (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 76. See also W. Ross Hastings, 'Honouring the Spirit': Analysis and Evaluation of Jonathan Edwards' Pneumatological Doctrine of the Incarnation', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), p. 295; Alan J. Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 127; Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972–1995* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), p. 192; Ryan M. McGraw, 'Seeing Things Owen's Way: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology and Piety in its Early-Modern Context', in Willem van Vlastuin and Kelly M. Kapic (eds), *John Owen between Orthodoxy and Modernity* (Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 192.

³Brian K. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), pp. 2–3.

⁴See n. 2 above and Ryan L. Rippee, 'John Owen on the Work of God the Father', *Puritan Reformed Journal* 8 (2016), p. 7.

⁵Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 409; Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, p. 105.

⁶Cornelius Plantinga Jr., 'Social Trinity and Tritheism', 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), p. 22. 'Relational Trinity' seems to be the more recent designation for this position and likely carries less connotative baggage; see Jason S. Sexton (ed.), *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014). However, I will use 'social' for the purposes of this article because (1) 'social' is the designation that advocates of this view use for Owen, (2) 'social' is more widely recognised as designating the position under discussion and (3) 'social' better names the distinction and uniqueness of the position – i.e. all parties involved are committed to some kind of 'relational trinitarianism' (e.g. persons as subsistent relations in Thomistic thought).

⁷While I have no desire to resurrect the de Régnon thesis (see Michel R. Barnes, 'De Régnon Reconsidered', *Augustinian Studies* 26 (1995), pp. 51–79), I am willing to engage the distinction because the contrast between eastern v. western (or Cappadocian v. Augustinian) paradigm is characteristic of social trinitarianism (e.g. Karen Kilby, 'Perichoresis and Projection', *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000), p. 434, lists this narrative as one of the three key distinctives of social models of the Trinity). So, while I am *not* suggesting that Owen is western and Augustinian in contrast to eastern and Cappadocian, I am suggesting Owen ought not to be contrasted with 'western/Augustinian' trinitarian theology.

(4) distinct communion of the Christian with different divine persons.⁸ The final section reinterprets Owen's trinitarian theology on each of these four putative points of radical distinction and provides an interpretation which aligns Owen with the Augustinian tradition.

Putative social, relational elements in Owen

In order to demonstrate the prevalence of this social-leaning interpretation of Owen and provisionally demonstrate the theological justification for their conclusions, this section will survey four frequent elements of social models of the Trinity and show the ways that Owen's trinitarian theology initially seems to commit him to such a view.

Personal distinction and perichoretic unity

A strong account of personal distinction *ad intra* is inherent to social models of the Trinity. Keith Ward suggests that social trinitarianism claims that triune 'persons are ontologically prior to substance' and that they are unified insofar as they mutually indwell one another (i.e. *perichoresis*).⁹

This strong sense of personal distinction and prioritisation of individuation is evident in Robert Letham's articulation of Owen's doctrine of the divine persons. Letham contrasts Owen with the 'classic Latin Trinitarian doctrine', in which 'God is essentially one, except in the divine persons, who are defined in terms of relations'.¹⁰ That is, the Augustinian account of persons as subsisting relations fails to adequately appreciate the personal distinction present in Owen's trinitarian theology. In other words, it is supposed that Owen considers the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as persons *in* relations (i.e. persons are prioritised), rather than the Augustinian view of persons *as* relations (i.e. relations are prioritised).

So if distinct divine persons are the initial and primary category of *ad intra* trinitarian thought, then social models must account for the divine unity of the one God. One common way of establishing the unity of these distinct persons is through the doctrine of *perichoresis* – or, mutual indwelling of divine persons. The theme of *perichoresis* is something of a 'theological black box' full of ambiguity and plasticity and, while it is not limited to 'eastern' or 'social' accounts,¹¹ it is central in social doctrines of the Trinity, serving as the key unifying principle of the three divine persons.¹²

Even some of Owen's most classical interpreters use this category prominently in considering his account of trinitarian action. For example, Ryan McGraw claims that *perichoresis* is the 'foundation of the *opera trinitatis* principle', the 'order and unity of divine operations' and 'mutuality of worship'.¹³ Likewise, Tyler Wittman suggests

⁸My goal in this list is not to name the necessary and sufficient conditions by which we might identify 'social trinitarianism' in general. Instead, this list names elements of social trinitarianism that are seemingly most prominent in Owen's thought and most unique to the position.

⁹Keith Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos* (New York: CUP, 2015), pp. 219–21.

¹⁰Letham, 'John Owen's Doctrine of the Trinity', p. 191.

¹¹Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (New York: CUP, 2007), p. 1. Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: OUP, 2010), pp. 300–6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.42.5.

¹²Kilby, 'Perichoresis and Projection', p. 435. On the history of the theme see Charles C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

¹³Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship and a Reassessment of John Owen's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 54, 68, 73.

that Owen ‘roots the unity of will in the doctrine of *perichoresis*, which then enables him to distinguish the one will in each person’.¹⁴

Distinct centres of will and the covenant of redemption

As stated above, social trinitarian accounts are frequently characterised by a commitment to distinct wills of the divine persons. The seeming possibility of multiple divine wills in John Owen is prominently evident in his account of the covenant of redemption, the ‘pre-temporal’ covenant in which the Father and Son covenant together to redeem humanity when humans fall into sin.¹⁵ Because the Father wills something in reference to the Son and the Son wills something in reference to the Father, it is supposed that there is, minimally, a strong sense of distinction between the willing of the Father and the Son.¹⁶ More maximally, this distinction may indicate that there are at least two wills and even two independent actors in the triune God. If this is the case, then the covenant of redemption not only pushes Owen in a proto-social direction, but it also may lead to tritheistic accusations.¹⁷

Distinct centres of action and triune operations

Often central to social trinitarian thought is the distinction between the actions of the divine persons in history. Representative of various accounts of social trinitarianism, McCall says that the divine persons are distinct and discrete ‘agents who are (or have) distinct centers of consciousness and will’ and he later interprets the gospel narratives of Jesus to imply that Christ is a ‘divine agent who is distinct and discrete from his Father’, enabling social models to articulate the ‘distinct actions of the Father ... and the distinct actions of the Son’.¹⁸

Likewise, some interpreters of Owen consider him to be a trailblazer as he putatively ‘radically’ distinguishes between the operations of divine persons.¹⁹ Especially advocated for by Alan Spence and Brian Kay, Owen’s trinitarian theology was supposedly only nominally and occasionally committed to the doctrine of the indivisible operations of the Trinity and, in practice, deviated from this traditional principle. The supposed breach in the indivisible operations is particularly obvious in Owen’s understanding

¹⁴Tyler R. Wittman, ‘The End of the Incarnation: John Owen, Trinitarian Agency and Christology’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 (2013), p. 292.

¹⁵For Owen’s treatment of the covenant see *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, in *WJO* 12: 496–508. For the history of this doctrine and the various phrases used to label it, see J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); for its history in relationship to Owen see Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2007), p. 82; and B. Hoon Woo, *The Promise of the Trinity: The Covenant of Redemption in the Theologies of Witsius, Owen, Dickson, Goodwin, and Cocceius* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018); and for an extended treatment of the doctrine in Owen see Kendall Cleveland, ‘The Covenant of Redemption in the Trinitarian Theology of John Owen’ (Ph.D. diss, University of St Andrews, 2016).

¹⁶Ryan L. Rippee, ‘John Owen on the Work of God the Father’, *Puritan Reformed Journal* 8 (2016), pp. 91–3; Laurence R. O’Donnell III, ‘The Holy Spirit’s Role in John Owen’s “Covenant of the Mediator” Formulation: A Case Study in Reformed Orthodox Formulations of the Pactum Salutis’, *Puritan Reformed Journal* 4 (2012), pp. 91–115.

¹⁷This criticism is seen poignantly in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p. 65.

¹⁸McCall, *Whose Trinity*, pp. 14, 58–9, 57.

¹⁹E.g. Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, p. 172; Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, pp. 2–3; Hastings, ‘Honouring the Spirit’, pp. 294–5, n. 53.

of the incarnation. They view Owen's theology as claiming that generally divine actions 'end' with the Spirit (since God indivisibly acts as Father, Son and Spirit), but the incarnation uniquely 'ends' with the Son, evidencing a unique action and breach of the indivisible triune pattern. If it were not for this reordering, they suppose, then it would have been the Spirit who becomes incarnate.²⁰

Brian Kay further specifies an interpretation of Owen's account of trinitarian action by distinguishing between indivisible essential works of the triune God that are 'performed by God in reference to his one-ness, such that each divine person is equally involved'²¹ (i.e. general acts) and divisible and distinct salvific acts wherein a 'real distinction exists between each person's work'.²² In these latter kinds of acts there is supposedly a

much more substantial distinction of activity that he [Owen] believes takes place when each member of the Godhead takes up his unique role in the project of saving sinners. The work of redemption proves to be a very different kind of work that stretches the otherwise proper boundaries of the doctrine of appropriations. That the Father and the Son, somehow, had different involvement in creation is in some sense very different from the deeper distinction of their activity when the Son leaves the Father's side and humbles himself to take human nature so that he can act as mediator between the Father and human beings.²³

Distinct communion

Finally, Owen's commitment to the Christian's communion with each divine person is maybe the most obvious objection to his Augustinian account of trinitarian unity. Owen's widely read book, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, argues for the distinct nature of the Christian's distinct communion with each distinct person. Owen is insistent that this 'distinct communion' with each divine person 'is very plain in Scripture'.²⁴ As such it would seem to intimate that the distinct persons act and are related to by the Christian in distinct ways, resisting many classical accounts of divine unity and inclining toward social constructions of God. This kind of distinction in Owen's trinitarian theology is a substantial part of Dale Stover's claim that Owen holds an 'extreme view of the personality of Father, Son, and Spirit'.²⁵ That is, each person seems to have a distinct personality, capacity to form relations and ability to act distinctly.

Reinterpreting Owen on personal trinitarian distinction

While the first section provided the putative evidence for Owen as a forerunner of social trinitarian theology, this section will provide a reinterpretation of Owen's thought and critique such a conclusion. It will argue for an understanding of Owen's trinitarian

²⁰ Alan J. Spence, 'John Owen and Trinitarian Agency', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990), p. 166; idem, *Incarnation and Inspiration*, pp. 131–7; Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, pp. 103–4, 188–9.

²¹ Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, 35.

²² Ibid., p. 103.

²³ Ibid., p. 104.

²⁴ WJO, *Communion*, 2: 11.

²⁵ Dale A. Stover, 'The Pneumatology of John Owen: A Study of the Role of the Holy Spirit in Relation to the Shape of Theology' (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, Montreal, 1967), p. 304.

theology that is consistent with, and rooted in, an Augustinian understanding of the unity of the divine nature. Each of the following four subsections (which topically correspond to the four subsections above) will provide a brief critique of the existing interpretation and then provide a positive reinterpretation of Owen's trinitarian thought in line with his Augustinian commitments to divine unity.

Personal distinction and essential unity

While some argue for an 'eastern' interpretation of Owen's view of divine relations, I contend that Owen's doctrine of the distinction of the persons in the divine essence is defined by the relations of origin and their order of subsistence. Letham contrasts Owen with the 'classic Latin Trinitarian doctrine', in which 'God is essentially one, except in the divine persons, who are defined in terms of relations'.²⁶ Yet Owen himself follows this very definition of a divine person. Owen defines a divine person as a distinct manner of subsistence in the divine essence and this distinct manner is determined by 'an especial Property' – i.e. a relational property (e.g. begetting the Son; being begotten of the Father). As such, 'In the person of the Father there is the divine essence and being, with its property of begetting the Son, subsisting in an especial manner as the Father'.²⁷ Owen clarifies: 'Because this person hath the whole divine nature, all the essential properties of that nature are in that person.'²⁸ The relations of origin (i.e. begetting, being begotten, spirating and being spirated) are not 'essential properties' (i.e. properties that belong to the divine essence), but 'personal properties' (i.e. properties of each particular person). For Owen, like the Augustinian tradition before him, the relations of origin define and constitute the divine persons.²⁹

This, therefore, aligns Owen with the 'western' view of 'persons as relations'. As Owen says, the trinity of God is not to be conceived of primarily as a 'unity of three' distinct persons, but instead as three subsistent relations 'in the same essence'.³⁰ Based on his doctrine of divine simplicity (whereby everything in God is God), Owen claims that a divine person is 'nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial Property, subsisting in an especial manner'.³¹

Finally, in contrast to the prominence of the theme of *perichoresis* in Owen's interpreters, Owen, in one place, flatly rejects the explicit use of *perichoresis* and instead insists on the subsistence of the three persons in the one divine essence as the unifying feature of the three persons. Of 'divine circumincession', Owen suggests, 'I could heartily wish that they [i.e. theologians of the church who use this language] had ... been less curious in their inquiries and less bold in their expressions'.³² He goes on to call 'mutual circumincession', or 'ἐμπεριχώρησις', a 'barbarous term' since it communicates a 'disjunction' of the three persons in 'their nature and being'.³³ Significantly, this claim

²⁶Letham, 'John Owen's Doctrine of the Trinity', p. 191.

²⁷WJO, *Vindication*, 2:407.

²⁸Ibid. See WJO, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12: 203, 73–4.

²⁹Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991), 5.3–8.9; Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (New York: CUP, 2010), pp. 211–20.

³⁰WJO, *Divine Original*, 16: 340.

³¹WJO, *Vindication*, 2: 407, emphasis mine; see also *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12: 73; *Pneumatologia*, 3: 77–80.

³²WJO, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12: 73.

³³Ibid.

immediately follows after Owen's presentation of divine simplicity and the definition of persons according to subsistent relations.³⁴

Even Owen's positive uses of the language of the divine persons' 'in-being' is primarily in reference to the persons' subsistence in the one divine essence, not their personal mutual indwelling of one another. Commenting on John 10:37–8, he appeals to the 'divine indwelling which *oneness of nature* gives to Father and Son'.³⁵ And elsewhere he says that 'the blessed *συμπεριχώρησις*, or in-being of each person, the one in the other' is 'by virtue of their oneness in the same nature'.³⁶

Therefore, *perichoresis* is far from a prominent theme in Owen – especially insofar as it is understood to mean the personal mutual interpenetration of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and it ought not to indicate Owen's strong personal distinction. In the places that Owen does not outright reject the concept, his articulation of the divine persons 'in-being' is to be primarily understood in reference to the persons' subsistence in the one divine nature, further supporting Owen's Augustinian understanding of divine persons as subsisting relations and the unity of the divine essence.

Singular will unity and the covenant of redemption

While the covenant of redemption does seem to imply multiple divine wills, Owen himself noted and responded to this concern explicitly. Rather than conceding that the covenant of redemption implies multiple wills in God, Owen insists on his Augustinian inheritance of one divine will. So in his discussion of the covenant of redemption, he raises the potential problem and prefaces his response by assuring the reader that whatever we call this covenant, mutual agreement, compact between the Father and Son 'they are *single* acts of the *same* divine understanding and *will*'.³⁷ From this Augustinian foundation, Owen avoids the putative social implications of the covenant of redemption by leaning on Augustinian commitments to (1) the eternality of God and (2) divine appropriations.³⁸ First, Owen clarifies the nature of the covenant by reminding the reader that this is an analogical description and a creaturely way of talking about a non-temporal reality. He reaffirms that, because God is simple and omniscient in himself, God does not discursively reason or experience succession of time.³⁹ Therefore, when we speak temporally and discursively of God, we do not mean it in a univocal sense. Second, Owen employs the concept of appropriations, or predicating properties of the divine nature to a divine person. So we can say that the Father is love and the Son is wisdom, while simultaneously recognising that love and wisdom belong to the essence of God and not to any person exclusively. Likewise, Owen can appropriate the one divine will to the Father which he enacts in a fatherly way (since the Father is fully divine and acts as the Father) and also appropriate the one divine will to the Son which he enacts in a filial way (since the Son is fully divine and acts as the Son). Owen says,

³⁴Ibid., 12: 70–3.

³⁵Ibid., 12: 175 (emphasis added).

³⁶WJO, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 3: 30.

³⁷WJO, *Sacerdotal Office of Christ*, 19: 77 (emphasis added).

³⁸Ibid. He also makes a fascinating appeal to christological dyothelitism that deserves attention, but is too complex to be covered here, see WJO, *Christologia*, 1: 56; and WJO, *Sacerdotal Office of Christ*, 19: 77–8.

³⁹See his articulation of God's 'simple intelligence or understanding' (WJO, *Perseverance*, 11: 142); see also T. Robert Baylor, "'He Humbled Himself': Trinity, Covenant, and the Gracious Condescension of the Son in John Owen", in Michael F. Bird and Scott Harrower (eds), *Trinity without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019), p. 173.

It is true, the will of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is but one. It is a natural property, and where there is but one nature there is but one will: but in respect of their distinct personal actings, this will is appropriated to them respectively, so that the will of the Father and the will of the Son may be considered [distinctly] in this business; which though essentially one and the same, yet in their distinct personality it is distinctly considered, as the will of the Father and the will of the Son. Notwithstanding the unity of essence that is between the Father and the Son, yet is the work distinctly carried on by them; so that the same God judges and becomes surety, satisfieth and is satisfied, in these distinct persons.⁴⁰

So even in this point of seeming plurality, Owen is insistent on the unity of God. He claims that the triune God is ‘one ... in nature, *will*, and essential properties’.⁴¹ Owen carefully delineates the way in which each divine person possesses the one will, wisdom and understanding of God, stating: ‘The wisdom, the understanding of God, the will of God, the immensity of God, is in that person, not as that person, but as the person is God.’⁴² That is, each divine person possesses the singular divine will ‘as the person is God’ and subsists in the one divine essence. Owen summarises:

The *will* is a natural property, and therefore in the divine essence it is but one. The Father, Son, and Spirit, have not distinct wills. They are one God, and God’s will is one, as being an essential property of his nature; and therefore are there two wills in the one person of Christ, whereas there is but one will in the three persons of the Trinity.⁴³

Unified action and triune operations

The supposed distinct trinitarian actions in Owen’s theology have received significant attention. Particularly in reference to Spence’s claim that Owen violates the principle of indivisible operations, Tyler Wittman has rightly argued for Owen’s continuity with Augustinian trinitarianism, noting the reliance of Owen upon Thomas Aquinas and John of Damascus (whom Owen explicitly cites in *Pneumatologia* 2.3) and the historical employment of the ‘terminus’ of indivisible triune actions – the divine person to whom the action is predicated, even though all three are causally involved. Wittman argues that Owen is not dividing the indivisible operations, but that Owen is claiming that the ‘terminus’ of the assumption (as an indivisible operation of the triune God) is the Son.⁴⁴ Adonis Vidu likewise engages Spence’s interpretation and helpfully provides the analogy of an Elizabethan butler who is helping his lord dress in formal attire. Both the butler and lord are actively *causing* the dressing (e.g. the butler is holding the jacket, the lord is placing his arms in the sleeves), yet the action *terminates* only upon the

⁴⁰WJO, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, 12: 497; see also WJO, *Sacerdotal Office of Christ*, 19: 88; B. Hoon Woo, ‘The *Pactum Salutis* in the Theologies of Witsius, Owen, Dickson, Goodwin, and Cocceius’ (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2015), pp. 381–5.

⁴¹WJO, *Catechism*, 1: 472.

⁴²WJO, *Vindication*, 2: 404–7.

⁴³WJO, *Sacerdotal Office of Christ*, 19: 87. For a further defence of the singularity of the divine will and the covenant of redemption in Owen see Cleveland, ‘The Covenant of Redemption in the Trinitarian Theology of John Owen’, pp. 72–4.

⁴⁴Wittman, ‘The End of the Incarnation’, p. 298; see also WJO, *Christologia*, 1: 225.

dressed lord (i.e. only he is 'dressed').⁴⁵ Therefore, argue Wittman and Vidu, all the acts of God are still indivisibly accomplished by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; yet, different acts 'terminate' upon (or can be predicated to) distinct divine persons based on the effect of the action.⁴⁶

Importantly, Owen insists that it is not as though 'one person succeeded unto another in their operation, or as though where one ceased and gave over a work, the other took it up and carried it on'; instead, 'every divine work, and every part of every divine work, is the work of God, that is, of the whole Trinity, inseparably and undividedly'.⁴⁷ This is not a divine relay race in which some actions 'end' before the Spirit gets the baton, but is more like, as Vidu elsewhere suggests, the acts of a magnet in which both poles are causally active, yet a paperclip only attaches itself to one side or the other.⁴⁸

Kay's interpretation of *Pneumatologia*, whereby Owen is supposedly 'stretching' indivisible operations so that the Son can 'leave the Father's side' to accomplish a 'very different kind of work' from general, indivisible divine acts has not received as much attention, but requires a similar reinterpretation. If Kay's reading is accurate, Owen would indeed be inclining himself toward a social doctrine of God. However, I contend that Kay misunderstands this text, which when interpreted properly supports Owen's Augustinian foundation. Kay views these two categories that Owen mentions (i.e. 'essential works' and redemptive acts) as mutually exclusive kinds of divine action (i.e. an either/or distinction between 'kind A' and 'kind B'). However, it seems that Owen is not indicating mutually exclusive categories, but describing the specification of one category as the subset of another (i.e. a species within a genus). So Owen's first category does not describe 50 per cent of divine acts, but 100 per cent of divine acts: Owen says that this 'is absolute in all divine works whatever'.⁴⁹ That is, all divine acts 'undividedly belong unto and proceed from each person'. And he follows immediately by stating, 'And the reason hereof is, because they are all effects of the essential properties of the same divine nature, which is in them all, or rather, which is the one nature of them all'.⁵⁰ Hereby, any and every act of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit can rightly said to be an act of God – e.g. God reveals himself in Jesus and God indwells Christians. The second category is a further specification of the first, but made under the consideration of 'the order of its accomplishment [which] was made necessary from the order of the subsistence of the distinct persons in the Deity'.⁵¹ That is, there is a further specification of the act on the basis of the triune order of operations. This second category goes beyond saying that 'God gives grace', to specifying that the 'Father, who is the original of all grace and glory' communicates grace to Christians 'from the Son, whom he ... hath given all things' and 'he doth it

⁴⁵Adonis Vidu, 'Trinitarian Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation', *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (2016), p. 112.

⁴⁶While I believe that there are multiple ways to predicate divine actions to distinct divine persons (i.e. appropriations and proper predication), they will not be addressed here. For a full treatment see Gilles Emery, 'The Personal Mode of Trinitarian Action in Saint Thomas Aquinas', *The Thomist* 69 (2005), pp. 31–77.

⁴⁷WJO, *Pneumatologia*, 3: 94–5.

⁴⁸Adonis Vidu, 'Ascension and Pentecost', in Marc Cortez, Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton (eds), *Being Saved: Explorations in Human Salvation* (London: SCM, 2018), p. 107.

⁴⁹WJO, *Pneumatologia*, 3: 198.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 3: 198–9.

immediately by the Spirit', who 'shows', 'bestows' and 'works' grace in Christians because these graces 'are the fruits of the mediation of Christ'.⁵² So Owen's distinction that Kay draws out here does not violate or stretch the trinitarian unity of divine actions, but further supports and specifies the indivisibly trinitarian shape of divine actions.

Rather than constituting an exception to the traditional position of indivisible operations, Owen's trinitarian theology is adamantly committed to it. His commitment to this principle of indivisible operations is rooted in his establishment of trinitarian operations upon an ontological foundation of essential unity.⁵³ Owen says, 'The order of operation in the blessed Trinity, as unto outward works, answereth unto and followeth the order of their subsistence', such that 'they have the same dependence on each other in their operations as they have in their subsistence'.⁵⁴ So, just as the subsisting persons are essentially related, so too are their operations. Owen calls this order 'unalterable' because God's 'working is a consequent of the order of his subsistence'. The unity of the triune relations produces the indivisibility of the triune operations *ad extra*. Indivisible operations is rightly called the 'regulative principle in his [Owen's] theological thinking' and the foundational 'axiom' for his thought.⁵⁵

Based on his consistent and Augustinian account of indivisible operations, Owen can affirm that all acts of God can be attributed to 'God absolutely' (i.e. the triune God) because 'the several persons are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence'.⁵⁶ Yet Owen continues on in order to distinguish between the appropriated acts of the distinct divine persons and does so in an Augustinian way. He says, 'In the undivided operation of the divine nature, each person doth the same work in the order of their subsistence ... as one common principle of authority, wisdom, love, and power'.⁵⁷ Rooted in the essential unity of the one God, the acts of God are indivisible acts of the three persons. Yet, as indicated above with the language of terminus, and his account of divine appropriations, this formulation need not result 'in a loss of the distinctiveness of the Spirit's work', nor does it indicate 'undifferentiated [triune] action' as some worry.⁵⁸ Instead, Owen follows his Augustinian forebears in arguing for indivisible triune operations, rooted in the triune relations *ad intra*, that can be appropriated to distinct persons by virtue of an act's terminus.

⁵²Ibid., 3: 199.

⁵³This point is often missed by more social-leaning interpretations of Owen. E.g. Brian Kay claims that 'only loosely does Owen connect his observation of distinction in the economy with the distinctions in God's personal emanations. . . . There definitely exists some tension between Owen and this aspect of Western tradition' (*Trinitarian Spirituality*, p. 36, see also pp. 115–16).

⁵⁴WJO, *Sacerdotal Office of Christ*, 19: 34; see also WJO, *Pneumatologia*, 3: 92; WJO, *Vindication*, 2: 407.

⁵⁵Quotes from Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2004), p. 101; and Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 202, respectively. See WJO, *Vindication*, 2: 407; *Christologia*, 1: 162, where Owen calls this the 'generally admitted principle' throughout the tradition up to his own day.

⁵⁶WJO, *Pneumatologia*, 3:93.

⁵⁷Ibid., 3: 93–4.

⁵⁸Spence, 'Trinitarian Agency', p. 172.

Distinct communion, appropriations and 'peculiar actions'

Finally, we can address the seemingly social trinitarian thought in *Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. Owen's account of distinct communion with each divine person begins with an important cautionary note: 'Only this caution I must lay in beforehand: – whatever is affirmed in the pursuit of this truth, it is done with relation to the explanation ensuing, in the beginning of the next chapter.'⁵⁹ And when we turn to the beginning of the next chapter in *Communion* we see that Owen begins by 'premissing some observations ... as was promised.'⁶⁰ The first premise is:

When I assign any thing as peculiar wherein we distinctly hold communion with any person, I do not exclude the other persons from communion with the soul in the very same thing. Only this, I say, principally immediately, and by the way of eminency, we have, in such a thing, or in such a way, communion with some one person. ... Now, the works that outwardly are of God (called 'Trinitatis ad extra'), which are commonly said to be common and undivided, are either wholly so ... or else, being common in respect of their acts, they are distinguished in respect of that principle ... in the manner of operation: so creation is appropriated to the Father, redemption to the Son. In which sense we speak of these things.⁶¹

That is, when 'we speak of these things' (i.e. distinct communion with each person) we do so under the consideration that no person is excluded in any act because of the indivisibility of divine operations *ad extra*. Yet, even though all trinitarian acts are 'common in respect of their acts, they are distinguishable' by way of appropriating an act to a distinct person as the *terminus* according to their 'manner of operation'. This prefatory note and premise evidence that Owen is not subverting Augustinian thought but building his entire account of distinct communion with each person upon an Augustinian understanding of indivisible operations and appropriations. As Owen nears the end of the treatise he reminds the reader, 'When any work of the Holy Ghost (or any other person), which is appropriated to him (we never exclude the concurrence of other persons), draws us to the worship of him, yet he is not worshipped exclusively, but the whole Godhead is worshipped.'⁶² Owen can devotionally speak of distinction without hesitation, yet he does so in accordance with Augustinian commitments to indivisible operations and appropriations.

So Owen is able to distinguish the communion that believers have with each divine person not on the basis of discrete actions of distinct persons toward the Christian, but by virtue of actions that are appropriated to that person. Owen says, 'There is no divine work but is distinctly assigned unto each person, and eminently unto one.'⁶³ That is, each work is rightly said to be enacted by all three persons (because they share in the one power, will and operation), yet it may be eminently ascribed to one divine person by virtue of the correspondence of the created effect with the relation of origin. He says, 'When any especial impression is made of the especial property of any person on any work; then is that work assigned peculiarly to that person.'⁶⁴ So the correspondence

⁵⁹WJO, *Communion*, 2: 11.

⁶⁰Ibid., 2: 18.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 2: 269.

⁶³WJO, *Pneumatologia*, 3: 93.

⁶⁴Ibid., 3: 93–4.

of the created effect to the personal relation justifies the appropriation of a particular action to that divine person. This predication does not exclude the causal action of the other persons, but it indicates the correspondence of that effect to a particular relation. Later, he states that by the divine works *ad extra* 'there is an especial impression of the order of the operation of each person, with respect unto their natural and necessary subsistence' in which we are 'distinctly taught to know them and adore' each divine person.⁶⁵

As the created effects reflect the relations *ad intra*, we see further support for the mirroring of distinction *ad intra* in the works *ad extra*. Owen clarifies that the 'order of operation' among the persons 'depends on the order of their subsistence'.⁶⁶ For Owen, this means that the works of 'power and authority' belong eminently to the Father, 'the procurement of grace' and display of wisdom to the Son, and the 'works of God whereby grace is made effectual unto us' to the Spirit.⁶⁷ Owen summarises:

God plainly declares that the foundation of the whole was laid in the counsel, will, and grace of the Father, chap. 1.3–6 [of Ephesians]; then ... the accomplishing of that counsel of his ... is by the mediation of the Son. ... There yet remains the actual application of all to the souls of men, that they may be partakers of the grace designed in the counsel of the Father, and prepared in the mediation of the Son; and herein is the Holy Spirit to be manifested and ... [t]his is the work that he hath undertaken.⁶⁸

Owen's designation of the Father as source, Son as wisdom and executer, and Spirit as power and efficacy is not unique to Owen but is a fixture throughout the tradition.⁶⁹ Owen elaborates upon this pattern of divine originating (appropriated to the Father), accomplishing/procuring (the Son) and perfecting/applying (the Spirit) throughout his corpus.⁷⁰ He bases the predication of distinctions in divine action on the order of subsistence, claiming, 'The beginning of divine operations is assigned unto the Father, as he is *fons et origo Deitatis*, – "the fountain of the Deity itself" ... Rom. 11.36. The subsisting, establishing, and "upholding of all things," is ascribed unto the Son: ... Col. 1.17 ... as he is the power and wisdom of the Father. ... And the finishing and perfecting of all these works is ascribed to the Holy Spirit.'⁷¹ As the Father is the origin of the divine relations *ad intra*, so too the Father is the 'spring or fountain of ...

⁶⁵Ibid., 3: 94–5.

⁶⁶Ibid., 3: 94.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 3: 190.

⁶⁹Basil, 'On the Holy Spirit', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 8: 23–6; Gregory of Nyssa, 'An Answer to Ablabius: That we Should Not Think of Saying there are Three Gods', in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), p. 262; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.xiii.18; Thomas Goodwin, *The Work of the Holy Ghost in our Salvation*, vol. 6 of *Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), IX.i.405; Hermann Venema, *Translation of Hermann Venema's Inedited Institutes of Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850), X.222; Henk van den Belt et al. (eds), *Synopsis Puioris Theologiae; Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Latin Text and English Translation Volume 2 Disputations 24–42*, trans. Riemer A. Faber (Boston: Brill, 2016), 2:71; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1974), p. 375.

⁷⁰See especially Owen's treatment of Acts 2:24 and 1 Pet 3:18 in *WJO, Pneumatologia*, 3: 181–2.

⁷¹*WJO, Pneumatologia*, 3: 94. See also *WJO, Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12: 392.

the kindness and love of God'. Likewise, as the Wisdom and Word of God *ad intra*, the Son is considered the 'procuring cause ... of the love and kindness of God'. Finally, the Spirit, as the one who is the communicated love and gift of the Father and Son, is the 'immediate efficient cause in the communication of this love and kindness of the Father, and through the mediation of the Son, unto us'.⁷² However, authority, wisdom and love do not belong exclusively to one divine person but instead are appropriated to the persons based on their order of subsistence. The reason that we might ascribe the work to all three persons is because in the 'undivided operation of the divine nature, each person doth the same work in the order of their subsistence ... as one common principle of authority, wisdom, love, and power'.⁷³ The reason there is the possibility of ascribing distinct acts to distinct persons is 'on the account of the order of his subsistence in the holy Trinity'.⁷⁴

By virtue of this account of appropriations on the basis of the created effects of indivisible divine actions, Owen is able to articulate the Christian's distinction communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without departing from his Augustinian heritage.

Conclusion

This article has argued against the trend of radical personal distinction between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the trinitarian theology of John Owen. Rather than departing from his 'western' theological heritage and striking a theological course toward the harbours of social trinitarianism, Owen's understanding of trinitarian relations and trinitarian action remain firmly within the Augustinian tradition.

While there may be superficial points of continuity between Owen and later social, or relational, accounts of the Trinity, this article has defended and extended Carl Trueman's claim that, with regard to 'the basic contours and substance of his doctrine of God', Owen is a 'rather typical figure' who builds 'on a long-standing Christian heritage'.⁷⁵ Owen's construal of personal distinction *ad intra* follows in lock step with his theological forebears in the 'western' tradition. And, as I have tried to demonstrate, Owen's commitment to the unity of the divine essence and the three persons as subsisting relations funds his account of trinitarian action as both unified and yet distinguishable. Therefore, Owen's understanding of indivisible operations and the 'peculiar acts' of each person retains its consistency with Augustinian trinitarianism. So rather than viewing Owen as a proto-social trinitarian who radically distinguishes between the actions of the triune persons, we can understand him as operating squarely within the Augustinian tradition.

When considered within the fabric of the history of trinitarian theology, this paper has argued that Owen may not be a candidate for proto-social trinitarianism, but he may provide an example of an Augustinian accounting of trinitarian personal distinction applied toward biblical, theological and devotional ends.⁷⁶

⁷²WJO, *Pneumatologia*, 3: 209; see also 3: 27, 93, 157, 200; *Christologia*, 1: 182; *Vindicatæ Evangelicæ*, 12: 171; *Communion*, 2: 389; *Pneumatologia*, 3: 157.

⁷³WJO, *Pneumatologia*, 3: 93.

⁷⁴Ibid., 3: 162.

⁷⁵Trueman, *John Owen*, p. 46.

⁷⁶I would thank Daniel J. Treier, Kyle Strobel, David Moser, Kendall Cleveland and Thomas H. McCall for their comments and suggestions on this paper.