

## Two Trinities: reply to Hasker

BRIAN LEFTOW

*Oriel College, Oxford OX1 4EW*  
*e-mail: Brian.leftow@oriel.ox.ac.uk*

**Abstract:** William Hasker replies to my arguments against Social Trinitarianism, offers some criticism of my own view, and begins a sketch of another account of the Trinity. I reply with some defence of my own theory and some questions about his.

William Hasker and I use ‘Social Trinitarianism’ [henceforth ST] differently.<sup>1</sup> To him, a position is a version of ST just if its Persons are, well, sociable – intrinsically able to relate to persons in distinctively personal ways (422). To him, then, my view is (barely) a version of ST (436). In my usage, ST is an explanatory project: ST takes the three Persons as in some way basic and explains how they constitute or give rise to one God. To me Latin Trinitarianism [henceforth LT] is also an explanatory project: LT takes the one God as in some way basic and explains how one God gives rise to three Persons. A view thus could be both a case of LT as I define it and a case of ST as Hasker defines that. It is also possible not to be a version of either: one might make no claim about priority, explain the oneness other than by the Persons’ giving rise to it, or explain the threeness other than by something about the one God. It would not be surprising if a view which is not a version of ST as I understand it escaped arguments I directed against ST as I understand it. Hasker does not state much of his view here, but I have read a fuller exposition, and it is not a version of what I call ST.

I’m not disposed to accept Hasker’s amendment. First a niggle: ‘rational cognitive faculties’ (436) don’t include a will, which is not a mode of cognition. Without wills, and for that matter affective faculties, it’s not clear how the Persons could ‘love and commune with’ (436) each other. This is, of course, easily remedied. Hasker claims that his ‘three complete sets of rational cognitive faculties’ must be there on my view too, to ‘support’ the lives of the three Persons (436). ‘Supporting’ their lives might mean explaining why there are ever three or why, given that there are, they continue to exist (if God is temporal). But I ‘explain’ the

distinctness of Personal lives by causal relations between strands of events in God's life, not faculties generating them.<sup>2</sup>

That is, for me, it goes this way: God, living His life as He does, causes there to be the events constituting *any* strand. God so lives His life that events in the Father-strand cause there to be a Son-strand. God living as Father, not a Son-supporting faculty, causes there to be God living as Son (and so similarly for the Spirit). It's not much of an explanation – ultimately I leave the Person-generating relations mysterious, as these are just the relations of begetting and spiration, and Trinitarian theology has usually left these at least somewhat mysterious. But if I am content to be mysterious where the tradition is, and if what 'explanation' I do give avoids them, I do not need Hasker's faculties. Further, my view sees the three lives in question as *God's* lives. It's not clear to me that having three sets of cognitive etc. faculties could literally make one being live three lives at once. Thus, it's not clear that the three faculties Hasker thinks I need could in fact do any work in my view. A time traveller with three segments of his life going on at one public time would have just one set of faculties. So if time travel provides a suitable model for the Trinity, as I've claimed, I don't see why God couldn't have just one set of faculties throughout.

### **One too many**

There seem to be too many divine substances in Hasker's view. There is God, the 'soul', and there are also three 'subjects of experience' which are persons. A personal subject of experience sounds like a substance. This gives us four divine substances, which is unorthodox. One could perfectly well worship God the divine 'soul' (436) rather than any Person: but there shouldn't be four objects of worship in the Trinity, none composed of any other. There are only three if the Trinity is just the plurality of the Persons, not an item composed of them.<sup>3</sup> I think it could be orthodox to have four objects of worship in the Trinity if one, the Trinity, is a composite object consisting of Persons. Then we could worship Father, Son, Spirit and the entire Trinity – four objects of worship – but as one is composed of the rest, there's a strong sense in which by worshipping it, one worships only the other three, and so the Trinity doesn't *compete* with its parts for worship. (It would be strange to say 'I'm worshipping the *Trinity*, not the Father, the Son and the Spirit.') So four needn't be too many – but it is if none consist of others, for then by worshipping the fourth one doesn't automatically worship only the other three.

An interesting question is whether, if one worshipped God the 'soul', He (It?) would be aware of this. It would be a bold man who said without qualm that God lacks consciousness. But as far as I can see, on Hasker's picture, the divine soul as distinct from the subjects doesn't have mental states on its own. The whole point

to positing the subjects is to get bearers for mental states that are distinct from God the soul, and if the soul also has its own mental states, there are four mental lives in the Trinity, which is surely one too many. But if one wants to claim that the divine 'soul' is aware through the three subjects, one has some explaining to do. If He (It?) *is* thus aware, God the soul either does or does not have 'internal access' (435) to all three strands of conscious life. He could have this only through some subject's mental states, since the soul has mental states only by way of the subjects.

If God through one subject has internal access to other subjects' mental states, perhaps one subject is privileged – it alone has access to others' minds. If so, we need an account of why this is so. If there is no privilege, each Person has internal access to the other Persons' mental lives. But each also has internal access to his own. Are the modes of access somehow distinct? If so, how, and are they *phenomenally* distinct? If they are not, how do Persons tell one set of mental states to which they have internal access from another? These don't look like easy questions. But if no subject has internal access to other subjects' mental lives, then since God the soul has experience only by way of Persons' experiences, God the soul has three mental lives, to each of which He has internal access, but from none of which He has internal access to any other.

That is, Hasker's view reproduces the 'strange conception' (435) that Hasker finds troubling in my own. But by contrast with my view, since the mental life of God the soul is distinct from that of any one Person – any one Person has internal access only to his own life, but the soul has it to all three – on this last alternative, we have four divine mental lives, to go along with four divine substances. So we seem to have four persons – again, unorthodox.

### **Divine attributes**

Hasker's account of omnipotence gives a hostage to fortune: if someone is omnipotent because he is 'able to do anything it is possible for a perfect being to do', then if a perfect being can't do moral evil, it seems that someone imperfect, who can do all a perfect being can and also do moral evil, could be able to do more – have a wider range of action – than someone omnipotent. But there cannot be a wider range of action than omnipotence gives one. Strictly, this should not even be conceivable. Whatever omnipotence is when fully parsed out, one pre-analytic truth about it is surely that no-one can do more than an omnipotent being can. Omnipotence is supposed to be the maximum of power, and one component of this, at least, is surely maximal range.<sup>4</sup> It's no reply to say that being able to do evil would be an imperfection: what would follow from that are that omnipotence is not a perfection and that God is not omnipotent, not that it is acceptable for it to be conceivable that someone be able to do more than an omnipotent being.

Again, Hasker's account of the Persons' omniscience is too weak: if a Person is omniscient just in virtue of 'knowing every truth that it is logically possible for him to know' (434), then Dumbo, who logically can know only that  $1+2=3$ , counts as omniscient. Hasker states in correspondence that:

My general view (which I ... did not make clear in the paper) is that ... divine attributes are best defined in terms of the general concept of God as the supremely perfect being ... The divine Persons ... are omniscient because each knows whatever it is logically possible that he, as a supremely perfect person, should know.<sup>5</sup>

This helps, but not enough. Heavyweights in the history of philosophy – Aristotle, Plotinus, Avicenna – have held that perfection rules out large swaths of knowledge. We disagree, but it's not as if there aren't intuitions pointing the other way. So we can't entirely scoff at counter-possibles with antecedent 'a supremely perfect person, as such, can know only that  $1+1=2$ '.

But then consider:

SP If any supremely perfect person, as such, could know only that  $1+1=2$ , the Persons would know only that  $1+1=2$  and be omniscient.

On Hasker's account, we should see nothing odd about SP being true. SP is just the consequence a proper understanding of divine omniscience should give us. But to me SP seems very odd. Even if all counter-possibles are true, some sound as if they shouldn't be, and SP is one of them. The *substantive* truth is surely that if the Persons knew only this, they wouldn't be omniscient. If SP is also true, this is only a fluke of the semantics of counter-possibles. It tells us nothing an account of omniscience need heed. Nor do I see why omniscience should be one thing for a divine Person and not that same thing for another knower, as is so on Hasker's account.

### **Hasker, Wierenga, Brower**

Hasker's discussion of Wierenga and Brower puzzles me. Wierenga proposed that in statements like 'The Father is God', 'is God' predicates a property, being divine. Brower argues that this can't be what the Creedal statement is doing. Hasker seems to accept this; at any rate he says that he will 'modify Wierenga's proposal ... in the light of this criticism by Brower' (432). But his 'modification' is to read 'is God' 'as ascribing a *property* of Godhood, or deity, to each of the Persons' (433). Hasker explains in correspondence that this is 'a qualitative property, the property of *being a divine or Godly being*'.<sup>6</sup>

I do not see how a property of a property of being a divine being differs from a property of being divine: what's been modified? Whatever the property is, Brower objects that having four things bear it won't do. As far as I can see, Hasker never

explains why four is OK or shows that there aren't four. Each Person is 'wholly God but not the whole of God' (434). The divine 'soul' can't be the whole of God if the soul and the subjects are all particulars and they are not parts of it but, at least as far as Hasker tells us, the soul doesn't have the subjects as parts.<sup>7</sup> Is the soul also 'wholly God'? If yes, we have four non-overlapping objects with as much claim to Godhood as a Person. If no, we have the Persons dependent on something that isn't even fully divine, and something less than fully divine in the Godhead.

Again, if there is such a thing as the Trinity, then if we ascribe thoughts and actions to it only as if it had them (434), it is not, strictly speaking, omniscient or omnipotent and so not wholly God. But it is the whole of God – or if it is not, because the divine soul is another bit of God, that creates its own worries. Can we be happy to say that the whole of God is not wholly God?

### **Arianism**

I adopted from Cornelius Plantinga an account of Arianism as belief that there is more than one kind of divine nature – more than one set of properties by which something can count as divine.<sup>8</sup> Hasker thinks my view involves this; according to Hasker, I hold that: 'God the Father is divine by being "God-living-the-Father-life-stream" ... The Trinity, on the other hand, is divine by being "God-living-simultaneously-the-three-life-streams-as-Father-Son-and-Holy-Spirit"'. The Father has attributes the Trinity as a whole does not have, and vice versa' (438, n. 36). But in fact, what I hold is that God the Father is divine simply by nature, by being Himself, the individual God is.

The Trinity is divine by being God, the individual God is living His life in three streams.<sup>9</sup> The Father and the Trinity do not share all attributes – the Father is God living just one life, the Trinity God living three – but the ones they don't share are not the ones that make the Father and the Trinity divine, nor do they yield distinctive ways to be divine. Thus it is false to say, as Hasker does, that if as is true on any Trinitarianism 'the Persons are divine, and also ... the Trinity is divine ... there will be "two ways to be divine" – by being a divine Person, or by being a Trinity of divine Persons' (431). At least one version of Trinitarianism isn't prey to this. Hasker doesn't dispute that what I call Trinity monotheism *is* prey to it; his move is only to claim that since all are tarred with the same brush, the tar should be ignored.

### **Some exegesis**

Hasker's treatment of my account of the Persons' distinctness reappears elsewhere, and I will take it up in reply to that paper. I close instead on an exegetical note. Hasker takes me to task for my reading of C. J. F. Williams. In the

pages Hasker discusses, there are both texts amenable to his reading and texts that point to my own. Williams speaks as if the two sets of texts express the same ideas, though they seem not to. Hasker prefers to interpret those that led me to my reading as bad ways to express the ideas in those that led to his.

I find this hard to believe. The passage Hasker cites as strongest evidence that my reading of Williams on will and act is wrong in fact concerns not the Persons' wills or their acts but their *love* – an affect or emotion, not an action or volition. It is thus not directly relevant to interpreting what Williams has to say on will and act. On the latter Williams says:

In God, to will is to act. So just as the divine Persons in their mutual love will the same thing with the same will, so they act in one and the same act. This is why ... all the *operationes ad extra* are acts of the godhead and acts of each of the divine Persons. It is in fact inaccurate to speak here of *acts* in the plural, or *operationes*. The act of creation is one act, a single decree ... the voice which utters that 'fiat' is at once the voice of the Father and the voice of the Son and the voice of the Holy Ghost. Each speaks with the voice of the others, which have become his own voice. For the voice of God is an inner voice, the very thought of the divine Mind. To us God says, 'my ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts.' But to the other Persons of the Holy Trinity each Person says, 'my thoughts ... *just are* your thoughts, my will your will, my act your act' ... there is no possibility of disunity between the acts of will of the divine Persons in their *operationes ad extra*. Indeed, unanimity is too weak an expression to describe what is meant. The will of the lover and the beloved coincide so completely that there is a single act of willing.<sup>10</sup>

The first claim about *operationes ad extra* seems to be offered not as equivalent to the claim about the same will and the same act, but as supporting that claim, which is broader, by being something the broader claim can explain. The broader claim runs this way. The Persons act 'in one and the same act ... one act, a single decree'. Behind this act is 'one voice' common to the Persons. This 'decree' is strictly speaking a volition, the voice behind it a will; 'in God, to will is to act'; the 'one-voice' claim, then, seems to be that the Persons have just one volition among them, 'a single act of willing'. This singleness is ultimately somehow explained by the distinct loves of the three Persons. Hasker's reading reduces the Persons' acts *ad extra* to a unanimity. This seems to be precisely what Williams wants to deny.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

1. William Hasker 'Objections to Social Trinitarianism', *Religious Studies*, 46 (2010), 421–439. All in-text page references are to this paper.
2. Brian Leftow 'A Latin Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy*, 21 (2004), 304–333, 314.
3. My thanks here to Joseph Jedwab.
4. So Wes Morriston 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 143–160.
5. William Hasker, personal communication.
6. William Hasker, personal communication.

7. Moreland and Craig call the subjects parts of God; William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 591. It's not clear whether they would infer from this that they are parts of the divine soul.
8. Cornelius 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), 34. Plantinga adds that in classical Arianism these natures were graded, i.e. having one was better than having another.
9. Or 'are divine,' if 'Trinity' is just a collective term for a plurality.
10. C. J. F. Williams 'Not by confounding the persons nor dividing the substance', in Alan F. Padgett (ed.) *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 242.
11. My thanks to Joseph Jedwab for helpful comments.