The persons of the Trinity are themselves triune: a reply to Mooney

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Abstract: **Justin Mooney (2018) advances what he calls The Problem of Triunity:
each divine person is God, God is triune, and yet, each of the divine persons is
apparently not triune. In response, I suggest that we ought to accept that each of
the divine persons is in fact triune. First, I offer a plausible analysis of the claim
that God is triune; second, I show that, given that analysis, there is nothing
untoward about embracing the conclusion that each divine person is triune. I
suggest that, once we take care to clarify what affirming the triunity of each divine
person does and does not commit us to, we will see that we are not thereby
committed to anything that contravenes orthodoxy – contrary, perhaps, to initial
expectations. Third, I argue that this view sits particularly well with the claim that
triunity is essential to divinity, whereas other views falter on this score. After
considering and responding to an alternative analysis of triunity, I consider an
objection to my analysis based on the salutary nature of communities. Finally, I
conclude by noting an important lesson we can glean from the problem of triunity
vis-à-vis trinitarian theorizing.**

Introduction

Justin Mooney (2018) advances a new problem for the doctrine of the
Trinity, which he calls *The Problem of Triunity*:

(1)   God is triune.
(2)   The Son is not Triune.[1]
(3)   The Son is God.

Taken together, (1) and (2) appear to entail that the Son is not God, which
contradicts (3).[2] Thus, Mooney says, 'Clearly something has gone wrong, for (1)–

(3) form an inconsistent triad; any two of them entail the negation of the third, and so at least one of them must go. Which will it be?' (Mooney (2018), 2).[3]

In what follows, I argue that we should reject (2).[4] First, I offer a plausible analysis of the claim that God is triune; second, I show that, given that analysis, there is nothing untoward about embracing the conclusion that each divine person is triune. I suggest that, once we take care to clarify what affirming the triunity of each divine person does and does not commit us to, we will see that we are not thereby committed to anything that contravenes orthodoxy – contrary, perhaps, to initial expectations. Third, I argue that this view sits particularly well with the claim that triunity is essential to divinity, whereas other views falter on this score. After considering and responding to an alternative analysis of triunity, I consider an objection to my analysis based on the salutary nature of communities. Finally, I conclude by noting an important lesson we can glean from the problem of triunity vis-à-vis trinitarian theorizing in general. Before moving on, however, I should note that throughout what follows I talk of properties, though in so doing I don't intend anything metaphysically contentious. If your ontology doesn't countenance properties, feel free to rephrase what I say in terms of predicates instead.

What is it to be triune?

What exactly is it for something to be triune? Those who gathered at the first council of Constantinople held that 'the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit have a single Godhead and power and substance' (Tanner (1990), 28). The second council of Constantinople anathematizes anyone who 'will not confess that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have one nature or substance, that they have one power and authority, that there is a consubstantial Trinity, one Deity to be adored in three subsistences or persons' (*ibid.*, 114). In his work on conciliar Trinitarianism, Timothy Pawl (2020) sums up the claim that God is triune this way: 'What is there one of? Nature, substance, divinity, essence, Godhead. What are there three of? Persons, hypostases, subsistences.' If we take these statements as expressions of what it is for God to be triune, we might be left with the impression that to be triune is to be such that one's nature or substance is possessed by three persons. But this is not quite sufficient since – given platonism – any three persons who are human would thereby count as triune, since they share a single nature or essence (viz. humanity). That seems like an unwelcome result – whether or not platonism is true. Fortunately, this can be avoided by stressing the dependence of the persons on one another.[5] Thus we can put forward the following:

> Analysis: 'X is triune' $=_{def}$ X's nature[6] is possessed by[7] three persons, each of whom exists only if the other two exist as well.[8]

A few features of Analysis are worth noting. First, as stated a moment ago, the dependence relations among the persons ensure that not just any three persons with the same nature count as triune. Second, the dependence relations at issue in Analysis are compatible with processions among the divine persons, although they do not require them; this is because the dependence relations at issue in Analysis are symmetric; the divine processions, on the other hand, are asymmetric – the Son proceeds from the Father, for example, but the Father does not proceed from the Son. Third, Analysis leaves open the question of how many triune beings there are. This, it seems to me, is as it should be. Trinitarian monotheism, of course, rules out the existence of more than one God. But that seems like a substantive claim. Intuitively, it shouldn't be part of the concept of triunity that any particular triune being is God, much less that there could only be one such being. Finally, Analysis leaves open the question of whether X is one of the persons who possesses the relevant nature. This will prove important in the next section.

Each divine person is triune

Given Analysis, to say that the Son is triune is just to say that he has a nature which is possessed by three persons, each of whom depends on the others. And as we saw in the previous section, the claim that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit 'have one nature or substance' is part and parcel of trinitarian theology. Thus, each person has a nature (i.e. the divine nature) which is possessed by three persons (i.e. by each other), and each person exists only if the others exist. Thus, far from being inconsistent with orthodoxy, the claim that the Son is triune seems – given Analysis – to fit quite naturally with orthodoxy. And, as already noted, all this applies equally well to both the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus, given Analysis, the trinitarian should not hesitate to affirm that each divine person is triune.

Triunity is essential to divinity

One advantage of the view that each divine person is triune is that it accommodates the claim that triunity is essential to divinity[9] – that is, the claim that anything which possesses the divine nature is triune.[10] This is important because – on the supposition that this is the case – it follows that either each divine person is triune, or the divine persons do not possess the divine nature. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (2017, 589) opt for the latter disjunct and maintain that, in fact, the divine persons do not possess the divine nature. On their view, God is identical to a being that is composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Since only God has the divine nature, it follows – on their view – that the Father, Son, and Spirit do not have that nature. Unfortunately, this appears to contradict the claims, quoted earlier, of the first and second councils of

Constantinople: recall that those councils held that the Father, Son, and Spirit have 'one Godhead' and 'one Deity'. Prima facie, the terms 'Godhead' and 'Deity' refer to the divine nature. Moreover, Colossians 2:9 tells us that, in Christ, 'all the fullness of deity dwells bodily' (English Standard Version). According to Louw & Nida (1988), the word translated 'deity' (*theotēs*) refers to 'the nature or state of being God'. Thus, the text seems to affirm that Jesus possesses the nature of God, i.e. the divine nature. Since the Father and the Holy Spirit each have the same nature as the Son, one ought to affirm that the Father and the Holy Spirit possess the divine nature as well. Thus, those who wish to follow scripture and tradition on this matter seem forced either to affirm that each of the divine persons is triune, or to deny that triunity is essential to divinity.

Why think that triunity is essential to divinity? Mooney (2018, 4–6) gives three reasons: first, God is triune in every possible world in which he exists and, plausibly, he's worshipped at least partially because he's triune. Triunity thus seems to characterize the sort of being God is, and in this way seems to reveal something about God's essence. Second, triunity is – at least prima facie – one of God's great-making properties, which would explain why it's one of the properties for which God is worshipped.[11] If triunity is essential to maximal greatness and maximal greatness is essential to divinity, then it follows that triunity is essential to divinity. Third, if triunity is essential to divinity, then this allows us to explain why God is triune – namely, because he is divine.

In response, you might maintain that while triunity isn't essential to divinity in the sense that it is impossible for someone to have the divine nature without being triune, triunity is nevertheless essential to the divine nature itself; in other words, you might think the divine nature cannot exist unless it is triune – where X is triune if and only if X is a nature possessed by three persons, each of whom exists only if the others exist.[12] Call this, then, the alternative analysis of triunity:

> The Alternative Analysis: 'X is triune' $=_{\text{def}}$ X is a nature possessed by three persons, each of whom exists only if the other two exist as well.

Moreover, you might hold that the divine nature is a maximally great nature, and that there are at least two ways for something to count as maximally great: by possessing a maximally great nature, or by being a maximally great nature. In this way, then, you might hold that the divine persons count as maximally great in virtue of possessing a maximally great nature. Triunity, you might think, is thus partly constitutive of the maximal greatness of the divine nature. While the divine persons possess a nature that is triune on this view – and they count as maximally great in virtue of possessing that nature – it doesn't follow from this that they are themselves triune.

The cost of this view is that it requires us either to deny that it is better to be triune than not, or to deny that the divine persons have every property which it is better to have than to lack. After all, given The Alternative Analysis, the divine persons are not triune. Thus, if it is better to be triune than not, then – on this

view – there is at least one property they lack which it is better to have than not – viz. the property of triunity. The only way out is to deny that it is better to be triune than not. Here I must admit that I don't have compelling arguments for either the claim that it is better to be triune than not, or the claim that the divine persons have every property which it is better to have than to lack. Be that as it may, both claims have some initial plausibility, and it would be better if we aren't forced to choose between them. Fortunately, on my analysis of triunity, we aren't.

An objection

Before closing, however, there is an objection to Analysis worth considering.[13] You might think that being a community is partly constitutive of maximal greatness – perhaps you think the extent to which we value community over isolation is evidence of this. And perhaps you think that X is a community only if X possesses multiple, suitably related minds. If you do, you might think that God is maximally great only if God possesses multiple, suitably related minds. And now an analogue of the problem of triunity confronts us anew, as follows: God possesses multiple, suitably related minds; each divine person is God; and yet it is not the case that each divine person possesses multiple, suitably related minds.

In response, I think Christians ought to reject the claim that being a community is partly constitutive of maximal greatness, at least if that claim implies that anything maximally great is a community. After all, each of the divine persons is maximally great and yet it is not the case that each divine person is – by himself – a community. Perhaps instead the relevant great-making property is *being a proper part of a community* or, if you like, *being a member of a community*.[14] Perhaps that's what our intuitions regarding the value of community are really latching onto. Fortunately, that is consistent with my analysis of triunity; after all, one can plausibly hold that each of the divine persons is indeed a proper part[15] – or a member – of a community. Of course, we shouldn't go on to identify the community in question with God himself – lest the problem of triunity reappear once more. So long as we refrain from that, however, there appears no reason to believe that the salutary nature of communities poses any threat to the analysis of triunity offered above.

Conclusion

As we have seen, embracing the conclusion that each of the divine persons is triune has several theoretical benefits. First, it yields a straightforward solution to the problem of triunity posed in the introduction. Second, it follows from a plausible analysis of triunity – one plausibly in line with the theology of the ecumenical councils. Finally, it easily accommodates the claim that triunity is essential to divinity.

Why, then, does the claim that each divine person is triune initially strike us as so counterintuitive? Here it may help to emphasize what is not entailed by the view: the claim that the Son is triune, for example, does not entail that the Son is absolutely identical to three persons and one being;[16] nor does it entail that the Son has a nature which is possessed by three additional persons – persons in addition to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rather, on the view I'm suggesting, the Son is just one person – one person whose nature is possessed by three persons, that is, by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each of whom exists only if the others exist as well. Thus, by Analysis, the Son is triune. Ditto for the Father and the Holy Spirit.

I should note in closing that we can glean an important lesson from the problem of triunity, which is that an analogous problem threatens any theory according to which God possesses a property that isn't possessed by any of the divine persons.[17] In the end, such theories are forced to deny either that the divine persons have the divine nature, or that God has the divine nature, or that the relevant property – the property lacked by each of the divine persons – is essential to divinity. All these options have costs, costs that – I suspect – are not worth paying. Thus, I suggest we steer clear of such theories, and in so doing embrace the conclusion that each of the divine persons is triune.

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Notes

1. For ease of exposition, I focus on the Son in what follows, though what I say applies equally to the Father and to the Holy Spirit as well.
2. The problem is gestured at in Stafford (2000), 70.
3. The problem of triunity ought to be distinguished from conjunctions that might seem superficially similar, such as the following: (a) God sent his son into the world; (b) Jesus did not send his son into the world; (c) Jesus is God. Here, (a) can be plausibly glossed as a claim made solely about the Father, and – once it is understood that way – the tension disappears. The problem of triunity, on the other hand, concerns a property that God has which – on the surface at least – the divine persons lack.
4. Mooney (2020) puts forward an episodic account of divine personhood. On this view, it tuns out that each person is technically triune, since each person 'is the divine substance that participates in three distinct episodes of personhood at once' (*ibid.*, 10). The chief advantage of my solution is that, in contrast to Mooney's, it doesn't depend on Ned Markosian's (2008; 2010) episodic account of identity under a sortal.
5. You might wonder why, rather than sidestepping the worry vis-à-vis platonism by stressing the dependence of the divine persons on one another, I don't stipulate that the nature in question is concrete instead. My desire here is to be ecumenical. Since there are likely to be trinitarians who hold that the divine nature is abstract, I'd rather remain neutral on the matter. As far as I am aware, however, there aren't any trinitarians who think that any of the divine persons can exist in the absence of any of the others. On the question of how this might relate to the divine attribute of independence, see note 17.
6. You might prefer that, instead of 'nature', I say 'essence' or 'substance', or perhaps even 'act of existence' here. For the purposes of this article, I take no position on how (or whether) these terms ought to be distinguished. Whatever your favoured term among those three, feel free to substitute it throughout. If you prefer a relative identity account of the Trinity, feel free to substitute 'being' in place of 'nature' throughout what follows.
7. I won't here consider Aquinas's view that the divine persons – despite being distinct from each other – are nevertheless identical to the divine nature (see ST I. Q. 39. A. 1). If you hold that view, and you think that it's inconsistent with Analysis as stated, feel free to substitute 'identical to' in place of 'possessed by' in Analysis and throughout what follows.
8. William Hasker (2013, 226) comes close to this in saying that 'the divine persons share a single concrete divine nature', but he stops short of offering this as part of an analysis of triunity, and he stops short of affirming that each divine person is triune.
9. The language used by Mooney (2018, 3) is that 'Triunity is a property included within the divine nature.' He uses this language because he construes the divine nature abstractly, in terms of the set of properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for divinity. Since I wish to be neutral with respect to whether the divine nature is abstract or concrete, I talk instead of the fact that – on my view – triunity is essential to divinity, by which I mean that it is impossible for one to have the divine nature without being triune.
10. As long as you also hold that the divine nature is necessarily shared by the same three persons; in that case, every world in which X possesses the divine nature is a world in which X's nature is shared by the same three persons. Thus, per Analysis above, on such a view it is necessarily the case that anything that has the divine nature is triune.
11. Here the claim isn't that any property for which God is worshipped is a property that is partly constitutive of maximal greatness. For example, you might think that God is worshipped partly for being the creator, though being the creator isn't even partly constitutive of his greatness, since he'd be maximally great without creating anything at all. Rather, the claim goes in the other direction: if a property is a great-making property, then God ought to be worshipped at least partly because he has that property. Thus, if triunity is among God's great-making properties, then that explains why he is worshipped for being triune. And that – the ability to explain why God is worshipped for his triunity – counts in favour of the view that triunity is a great-making property.
12. This is a close cousin of a view expressed to me by Tim Pawl in personal correspondence. Rather than natures and persons, he talks instead of unities and supposits. But, so far as I can tell, my response to The Alternative Analysis below applies equally to his view.
13. I owe this objection to Justin Mooney.
14. Of course, theists who deny the doctrine of the Trinity will deny that either *being a community* or *being a proper part of a community* is required for maximal greatness, since – on their view – presumably God is

maximally great regardless of whether he is part of a community. An anonymous referee wonders what might be said to a non-theist who nevertheless thinks that God, if he exists, is a community. By way of retort, note that if God is a community, then God is plausibly a community *of persons*. Since the persons in such a community would be divine persons, it is plausible to suppose that they would be maximally great persons. And if they would be maximally great persons, then it follows even on this view that *being a community* is not partly constitutive of maximal greatness – since even on this view no divine person would be a community.

15. In suggesting the possibility that the divine persons are proper parts of a community, I don't intend to deny the doctrine of divine simplicity. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why I go on to deny that the community of which the divine persons are proper parts is identical to God. However, Aquinas argues (ST. I. Q. 3 A. 8) that it is impossible for God be part of any other thing. It's not clear to me that his arguments for that claim apply in the present context but, even if they do, the substance of my suggestion can be retained by treating communities as pluralities rather than things, and then holding that each of the divine persons is included in just such a plurality.

16. Of course, on my analysis of triunity, the claim that the Son is triune is nevertheless compatible with the claim that the Son is relatively identical to three persons and one being. On such accounts, the Son is also plausibly the same God as three persons and one being, despite not being the same person as three persons and one being. Thus, my view is compatible with – but does not require – the claim that God is three persons.

17. You might think that *independence* is one such property. After all, God is supposed to be independent, and yet each of the divine persons depends on the others. I think we ought to respond by construing divine independence as the claim that God doesn't stand in asymmetric dependence relations. This might be construed in one of three ways: one option is to note that, for some properties, God counts as possessing that property if at least one divine person possesses that property – as when, for example, God possesses the property of *having sent his Son into the world* because the Father sent the Son into the world. Similarly, one might hold that God possesses the property of independence because the Father doesn't stand in asymmetric dependence relations. Another option – taken by Pawl (2020) – is to hold that none of the divine persons stand in asymmetric dependence relations, and to deny that the divine processions are dependence relations. A third option – taken by Craig (2019) – is to accept that divine processions would be asymmetric dependence relations, and then to preserve God's independence precisely by denying that there are any such processions in God.