Trinity, generality, and dominance

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Abstract: I defend a relative identity solution to the identity puzzle posed by the doctrine of the Trinity. It has been argued that relative identity theories which admit absolute identity, such as the account proposed here, do not succeed in saving the doctrine of the Trinity from logical incoherence. I show that this argument fails. Relative identity theories that admit absolute identity are logically conservative, metaphysically innocent, and unproblematic. And, given the account I propose we can, without incurring any logical or metaphysical costs, hold that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the *same being* but not the *same trinitarian person*.

RI-Trinitarianism

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is held by critics to be logically incoherent in so far as it is committed to both monotheism and the distinctness of divine persons. As monotheists Christians – at least those who endorse the Athanasian Creed – hold that the Persons of the Trinity are one God;[1] as trinitarians they affirm that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three Persons. Peter van Inwagen and others (Cain (1989); Martinich (1978); van Inwagen (2009)) have argued that the doctrine can be shown to be logically coherent if it is recognized that identity, at least when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity, is sortal relative, so that while Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not the *same trinitarian person* they are the *same being*.

This solution to the Trinity puzzle has not found favour in recent years. Relative identity is in bad odour and the theory of relative identity initially proposed by Geach, in particular, is problematic. 'Due to the extravagance of his theory', Pawel Garbacz writes, 'relative identity (RI for short) has not been warmly welcomed by his contemporaries. In particular Geach's rejection of absolute identity (AI) turned out to be fatal for any future theory of RI.'[2] Theories of relative identity, however, need not exclude absolute identity. A number of writers, including Nicholas Griffin (1977) and Harry Deutsch (1998; 2007) – and, some suggest, John Locke – have developed relative identity theories that recognize absolute

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identity as well as sortal-relative identity relations. More recently, Garbacz (2002) has explored a 'minimal' theory of relative identity that is not committed to a number of controversial theses, including the doctrine that absolute identity statements are either syntactically or semantically incomplete. Still, relative identity theories, however minimal, are controversial. And philosophers concerned to make sense of the Trinity doctrine are reluctant to hitch their theology to theses that are, at best, disputed.

Michael Rea and others (Rea (2009); Hasker (2013); Tuggy (2014)), however, have argued that even if we do not reject relative identity *tout court*, relative identity theories do not yield theologically acceptable or logically coherent articulations of the Trinity doctrine. Rea argues that advocates of the relative identity approach are faced with a dilemma: relative identity theories that reject absolute identity are committed to an anti-realist metaphysic, which is theologically unacceptable; those who admit absolute identity as well as sortal relative identity relations do not succeed in saving the doctrine of the Trinity from logical incoherence. I shall argue that we can safely grasp the second horn of Rea's dilemma.

Rea's objection to RI theories that admit absolute identity rests on his intuition that 'x is (absolutely) distinct from y' is synonymous [sic] with 'x is not the same being as y'. The principle **P**, on which his argument rests, follows from his synonymy intuition:

P: $\forall x \forall y (x \neq y \rightarrow \sim x\mathrm{B}y)$.

P says that for all x, y, if x is not absolutely identical to y then x is not the *same being* as y. The consequences for RI-Trinitarianism are dire. According to this account, the Father is the same being as the Son but not the same trinitarian person and so the Father $\neq$ the Son. Given **P** it follows, therefore, that they are not the same being. So even if the Relative Identity theorist's contention that, for *some* sortals, *F, G*, it is possible that x be the same *F* as y but not the same *G* as y, is correct, it is not possible that x be the same *being* as y but not the same *F* as y. It is not, in particular, possible for the Father to be the same *being* as the Son but not the same trinitarian person as the Son. But **P** is questionable and, as I shall show, there is no reason why an RI theorist should endorse it. And so, it will be shown, RI-Trinitarianism is logically coherent.

Before further consideration, however, we need to determine how **P** should be read for the purposes of this discussion.

Being and identity

According to relative identity theories that recognize absolute identity, $x \neq y$ is ambiguous: it can be given a 'strong' or 'weak' reading:

> WEAK $\neq$: NOT-x is absolutely identical to y.
> STRONG $\neq$: x is absolutely NON-identical to y.

According to the orthodox, absolutist account of identity this is a distinction without a difference: x and y are either identical or not identical – if it is not the case that they are absolutely identical then they are absolutely non-identical. According to RI theories that recognize absolute identity however this does not exhaust the possibilities. On such accounts, absolute identity is understood as identity under *all* sortals, so that x = y if and only if for all sortals, *F, x* is the same *F* as *y*. The negation of $x = y$ is therefore ambiguous. On the 'weak' reading $x \neq y$ says that it is not the case that for all sortals, *F, x* is the same *F* as *y*; on the 'strong' reading $x \neq y$ says that there is *no* sortal *F* such that *x* is the same *F* as *y*.[3]

Given the strong reading of '$x \neq y$' **P** says that if there is *no* sortal, *F*, such that *x* is the same *F* as *y* then *x* is not the *same being* as *y* and, consequently, that if *x* is the *same being* as *y* then there is *some* sortal, *F*, such that *x* is the same *F* as *y*. Relative identity theorists accept **P** if '$\neq$' is given this reading since, understood in this way, **P** is trivial: it simply rehearses the truism that if there is no sortal-relative identity relation that holds on *x* and *y* then *a fortiori* the *same being* relation does not hold on *x* and *y*. Moreover, if **P** is understood in this way, Rea's argument does not get off the ground. On this reading, assuming the Father is the *same being* as the Son, it follows only that there is *some* sortal, *F*, such the Father is the *same F* as the Son – not that the Father is the same *trinitarian person* as the Son.

Assuming the weak reading of '$x \neq y$' **P** says that if there is *some* sortal, *F*, such that *x* is not the same *F* as *y* then *x* is not the *same being* as *y*, and so that if *x* is the *same being* as *y*, then for *all* sortals, *F, x* is the *same F* as *y*. Understood in this way, **P** implies that if the Father is the *same being* as the Son then the Father and Son are the same under *all* sortals, hence that the Father is the *same trinitarian person* as the Son. If **P** is understood in this way, then the RI-trinitarian's claim that the Father and Son are the same being but not the same trinitarian person is, as Rea argues, logically incoherent. For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, we should accept the weak reading of '$x \neq y$' and understand **P** accordingly, to say that unless *x* is absolutely identical to *y, x* is not the same being as *y*.

A number of writers have taken **P**, presumably on this reading, to be plausible and have regarded Rea's argument as decisive. So Dale Tuggy (2014), in the industry-standard *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, writes: 'It seems that any things which are non-identical are not the same being . . . Thus, van Inwagen has not demonstrated the consistency of (this version of) trinitarianism' – without further comment. William Hasker, in *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, the first full-length study of the doctrine of the Trinity from the standpoint of analytic philosophical theology, rehearses Rea's objection to the relative identity account of the Trinity doctrine, apparently endorsing his critique:

> Any RI-trinitarian is going to want to say that
> (Q) The Son is not the same trinitarian person as the Father, but the Son is the same Being as the Father.
> Rea argues, however, that if absolute identity exists, it is highly plausible that
> (P) If *x* and *y* are non-identical, then *x* is not the same being as *y*.

> In support of this, he states that 'Being' is plausibly the most general sortal, on a par with sortals like 'entity', 'thing', and 'object'. Thus, '*x* is (absolutely) distinct from *y*' seems to be synonymous with '*x* is not the same being (thing, entity, object) as *y*.' If this is right, then P is analytic. This, however, entails that the RI-trinitarian assertion Q is necessarily false; since Father and Son are distinct trinitarian persons, they cannot be absolutely identical, and if they are absolutely distinct, then (according to P) they cannot be the same being. (Hasker (2013), 127)

So Rea's objection to RI-Trinitarianism has been propagated through the literature. But Rea is wrong.

Relative identity

RI-trinitarians, as Hasker notes, endorse the following two claims:

(1)   The Father is the same being as the Son.
(2)   The Father is not the same trinitarian person as the Son.

Predicates of the form '*is the same F as*', where *F* is a sortal term, are *relative identity (RI) predicates* and statements in which they figure, like (1) and (2), are *relative identity* (*RI*) *statements*. Relative identity statements are statements of the form '*x* is the same *F* as *y*'.

According to the standard analysis, RI statements 'break down' into property ascriptions and identity claims (Perry (1970), (1978)):

> **Standard Analysis:** '*x* is the same *F* as *y*' should be understood to say '*x* is an *F* (and *y* is an *F*) and *x* = *y*'.

On this account, for all *x, y*, and any sortals *F, G*, it is not possible that *x* be the same *F* as *y* but not the same *G* as *y*: RI statements, on the standard analysis, entail absolute identity so, given the Indiscernibility of (Absolute) Identicals, since *x* is the same *G* as *x, y* must be the same *G* as *x* too. Thus, given the standard analysis of RI statements, (1) and (2) are inconsistent. (1) implies that the Father = the Son and so that the Father and Son are, with respect to every property, indiscernible. Since the Son is the same trinitarian person as the Son, it follows that the Father is the same trinitarian person as the Son.

Relative identity theories reject the standard analysis of RI statements. On such accounts, to be an *F* is to be the *same F* as something or other:

> **Sortal Predication:** where *F* is a sortal term, *a* is an *F* iff ∃*x* (*a* is the same *F* as *x*).

And relative identity statements are understood accordingly:

> **Relative Identity (RI) Statement:** *a* is the same *F* as *b* iff ∃*x* (*a* is the same *F* as *x* and *b* is the same *F* as *x*).

Since sortal-relative identity relations are transitive, it follows that *x* is the same *F* as *y*.

This account captures the spirit of the standard analysis of relative identity statements without involving absolute identity. As on the standard analysis, x is the same F as y only if x is an F and y is an F. This account, however, does not require further that $x = y$ but only that there be something or other to which x and y each bear the *same F* relation.

All relative identity theories, in addition, are committed to

> **R:** it is possible for objects x and y to be the same F but not the same G, where (i) F and G are substantival predicates, designating kinds of individuals, rather than adjectival predicates, and (ii) x is an F, y is an F, x is a G, and y is a G.

R specifies, first, that (i) the predicates in question be substantival.[4] Where a predicate, F, is adjectival, statements of the form 'x is the same F as y' do not, on anyone's account, imply $x = y$. My piano is the same colour as my wastebasket but not the same shape. They *have* the same colour property and different shape properties, but neither is itself either a colour or a shape. In such cases, identity – at least the identity of particulars – does not enter into the picture. **R**, however, says that it is possible for individuals to be the same F but different Gs even where F and G are *sortals*, that is, count nouns conveying criteria of identity.

Second, **R** says that, (ii) where F and G are sortals, it is possible for individuals to be the same F but not the same G in non-trivial cases. Everyone agrees that things can be the same F but not the same G if they (or *it*) are not Gs at all. Mark Twain is the same person as Samuel Clemens but not the same number as Samuel Clemens since Mark Twain, aka Samuel Clemens, is not a number. That is to say, Mark Twain is neither the same number as Samuel Clemens nor a different number from Samuel Clemens. The standard analysis allows that x and y be the same F but not the same G in such trivial cases. **R**, however, says that *even where x and y are Gs, x* and y may be the same F but not the same G – that is, they may be the same F but *different G*s.

Some relative identity theories, notably the theory originally proposed by Geach, reject absolute identity altogether. According to Geach:

> When one says 'x is identical with y', this, I hold, is an incomplete expression; it is short for 'x is the same A as y', where 'A' represents some count noun understood from the context of utterance – or else, it is just a vague expression of a half-formed thought. (Geach (1967), 3)

> These accounts, henceforth *D-theories*, affirm **D** as well as well as **R**:

> **D:** Statements of the form '$x = y$' are incomplete and therefore ill formed. A proper identity statement has the form 'x is the same F as y'. (Rea (2009), 253)

Other relative identity theories, henceforth *R-theories*, admit statements of the form '$x = y$' but deny that RI statements break down into property ascriptions and absolute identity claims.

R by itself does not, however, guarantee the consistency of (1) and (2). It says only that there are *some* pairs of RI predicates, *same F* and *same G*, such that it is possible for *x* and *y* to be the same *F* but not the same *G* – not that that is true of all pairs of predicates. And it remains to be seen whether divine individuals can be the *same being* but not the *same trinitarian person.*

Where it is not possible that *x* and *y* be *the same F* but not *the same G* we say that *same F dominates same G*. Peter van Inwagen, who has argued that relative identity theories can be exploited to develop a logically coherent doctrine of the Trinity, understands RI dominance as follows:

Dominance: An RI-predicate *I* dominates a predicate *F* (*F* may be of any poly-adicity and be either ordinary or RI) if all sentences of the form 'Iαβ → (F . . . α ←→ F . . . β)' are true. We say that an RI predicate that dominates every predicate is dominant. (van Inwagen (2009), 230)

On this account, RI predicates may dominate other RI predicates. *Same F* dominates *same G* if being the same *F* entails being the same *G*. We call RI predicates *dominant* if they dominate all predicates, including sortal-relative identity predicates, so if *same H* is dominant, then being the same *H* entails being the same *F* for all sortals *F*. Finally, domination may be mutual: for some *F*, and *some G*, *same F* dominates *same G* and vice versa. Indeed, to reject **R** is precisely to hold that *all* RI predicates are dominant – that is, that for all *x, y* and all sortals *F, G, x* is the same *F* as *y* if and only if *x* is the same *G* as *y*, where *x* is an *F* and *y* is an *F* and *x* is a *G* and *y* is a *G*. To embrace **R** is to hold that one-way or *asymmetric dominance* is possible, that is, that there can be predicates that are not dominant. According to the RI defence of the Trinity doctrine, *same being* is not dominant: in particular, the claim is that *same trinitarian person* dominates *same being* but not vice versa.

Uncontrived non-theological cases of asymmetric dominance are hard to come by: Geach, notoriously, introduced the purpose-built sortal *surman* to produce an example. There do, nevertheless, seem to be some uncontrived examples. To see how a case of asymmetrical dominance looks, consider the stock case in which we might say that different airline passengers are the same person, e.g. that the occupant of Seat 6a on last week's flight to Baltimore is the *same person* as the occupant of Seat 17c on today's flight to San Diego but a *different passenger.*

Airlines, as the relative identity theorist understands it, count by *passenger*: when it comes to determining how much business they've done over a period of time what they care about is how many seats per flight were filled. It does not matter to them whether Seat 6a and Seat 17c were occupied by the same person or by different people: in either case, the airline did two units of business – that is, it served *two passengers*, who happened to be the same person. *Person* therefore, does not dominate *passenger*: 6a and 17c are the same person but different passengers. *Passenger,* however, dominates *person*. Passengers are people. And airlines assign no more than one person to a seat on any given flight – babes in

arms and companion animals count as baggage. So on any occasion the same legal seat occupant, i.e. the same passenger, is the same person.

Dominance is theory-relative. In Airline Theory, *passenger* asymmetrically dominates *person* because the identity conditions for *passenger* are more stringent than the identity conditions for *person.* To be the *same passenger* you not only need to satisfy the identity criteria for *person* (whatever they are): you also have to satisfy an additional condition concerning seat assignment, which confers legal seat-occupancy. Passengers 6a and 17c fail that additional condition: they do not legally occupy the same seat on the same flight and so are the same person but different passengers.

Consider, however, Airline Theory Minus, which lacks the resources to distinguish passengers by legal seat occupancy. Its ideology does not include any of the familiar customer service predicates, such as 'reservation', 'confirmation number', 'ticket', 'flight number', or 'seat-assignment', but it is, in every other respect, like Airline Theory. In Airline Theory Minus the only predicates available for distinguishing passengers are those that distinguish persons, so in Airline Theory Minus *person–passenger* dominance is mutual: you have the *same person* if and only if you have the *same passenger*.

Adding customer service predicates to the theory, to make Airline Theory proper, does not bring entities of a new kind into existence. Passengers are just people. And people don't dominate – predicates do. Dominance is a grammatical feature of predicates, like 'passenger', that marks entailment relations. If 6a is the *same passenger* as the one who picks up the first bag on BWI Airport Carousel #3, it follows that 6a is the *same person* as that individual. Dominance depends upon a theory's stock of predicates and, most importantly, on its sortals, which convey *identity criteria*, that is, shortlists of conditions that are necessary and sufficient for the identity of objects of that sort. An RI predicate *same F* dominates an RI predicate *same G* within a theory if the theory has predicates that figure in the identity criteria for *F* to distinguish individuals as different *F*s that do not distinguish them as different *G*s.

The relative identity account of airline practices is metaphysically innocent. It is not an account of what there is and it does not introduce passengers into our ontology in addition to persons. It says only that we can adopt different procedures for counting what there is: we can count by *person* or count by *passenger*.

The relative identity account of the Trinity doctrine is, likewise, metaphysically innocent. It does not favour Latin Trinitarianism or Social Trinitarianism, or provide any reason to prefer orthodox doctrines to heterodox accounts or vice versa. It merely provides a way of understanding (1) and (2) that avoids contradiction. RI-Trinitarianism is not yet another speculative, metaphysical account of the nature of God: it is, rather, a strategy for avoiding speculative metaphysics. Even if there is real, substantive, metaphysical disagreement between Latin Trinitarians and Social Trinitarians, or between orthodox trinitarian Christians and Arians, Sabellians or advocates of other heterodox theologies, RI-Trinitarianism is neutral: dominance is a semantic notion, without ontological import.[5]

If dominance is understood in this way, the prospects for a coherent, orthodox Trinity theory, which articulates the doctrine developed by the Fathers of the Church, look promising. During the first centuries CE, according to the RI-trinitarians' rational reconstructionist account, the Fathers enriched the theology they inherited from Second Temple Judaism – God Theory Minus – with a stock of specifically Christian predicates. To the inherited generically divine predicates, among them those designating omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and other perfections, they added *hypostasis, homoousios*, and a variety of other terms needed to articulate specifically Christian doctrines. Engaging in rational reconstruction, an RI-trinitarian can understand the development of the Trinity doctrine as a programme for licensing some inferences while blocking others – in particular, for ascribing a range of properties to the Son but not to the Father, while maintaining monotheism.

A sortal-relative identity relation is an indiscernibility relation for a restricted range of predicates and the character of a given sortal, *F*, determines which predicates pass from *F* to same *F* and which do not. Theologians wanted generically divine predicates to pass from trinitarian person to trinitarian person, so that when it came to godhead, glory, omnipotence and the like they could affirm 'Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost' (Athanasian Creed). But they did not want specifically hypostatic predicates to pass promiscuously around the Trinity. They were keen, in particular, to avoid Patripassionism, the heterodox doctrine that the Father suffered on the Cross. So, according to the RI-trinitarian's reconstruction, they developed trinitarian God-Theory to block the inference from 'the Son suffered on the Cross' to 'the Father suffered on the Cross'. Within their predicate-enriched theory it was possible to distinguish trinitarian persons and to block heretical inferences. *Same being* was an indiscernibility relation for generically divine predicates but not for specifically hypostatic predicates. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were the same being, indiscernible with respect to generically divine attributes, but not with regard to paternity, filiation, procession, incarnation, or passion.[6]

Adding specifically hypostatic predicates to prevent promiscuous predicate-passing did not, of course, bring additional divine beings into existence any more than the introduction customer-service predicates added passengers to the San Diego–Baltimore round trip. Passengers are just people and trinitarian persons are just God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *homoousios* – the same being – but not the same trinitarian persons on this account, which is to say, *same being*, at least within Trinity Theory, does not dominate *same trinitarian person*. If this is correct, then we cannot infer from (1), according to which Father and Son are the *same being*, that they are the same *trinitarian person*. (1) and (2) are therefore consistent and, to that extent at least, the doctrine of the Trinity can be coherently stated. So says the RI-trinitarian.

Rea's reductio

Rea's objection to the RI-trinitarian argument turns on the claim that *being*, because it is maximally general, is dominant and, hence, dominates *trinitarian person*.[7] **P** is just the contrapositive of the claim that the RI predicate *being* dominates absolute identity – and so *same trinitarian person*.[8]

Rea claims that since **P** is 'highly intuitive', positive reason must be given for rejecting it. He has not, however, made the case that **P** is intuitively correct or that any intuitions we might have regarding **P** should be taken seriously. 'Being' is a term of art: the Folk have no intuitions about **P**. And, arguably, most philosophical identity connoisseurs' intuitions have been corrupted by prior commitments to analyses of relative identity statements that advocates of relative identity repudiate. If, however, **P** is correct then, unless absolute identity statements are rejected as 'incomplete and therefore ill-formed', (1) and (2) entail a contradiction. Rea's proof is as follows (Rea (2009), 263):

> (RT8) $\exists x \exists y(xBy \& xPx \& \sim xPy)$ [that is, $\exists x \exists y$ s.t. x is the same *being* as y & x is the same *trinitarian person* as x & x is not the same *trinitarian person* as y]
> But, allowing that there is such a thing as *absolute distinctness* [emphasis added], the conjunction of $xPx \& \sim xPy$ implies $x \neq y$.[9] Thus, RT8 implies RT9
> (RT9) $\exists x \exists y(xBy \& x \neq y)$
> But RT9, together with **P**, implies RT10, which is a contradiction:
> (RT10) $\exists x \exists y(xBy \& \sim xBy)$

(RT8) follows from (1) and (2). (1) says that there are *x, y*, viz. the Father and the Son, such that x is the same being as y and (2) that there is an individual, viz. the Father, which is the same trinitarian person as himself but not the same trinitarian person as the Son. If absolute identity is admitted, (RT8) implies (RT9), which says that there is an *x, y*, such that *x* is the same being as *y* but $x \neq y$. A relative identity theorist who rejects absolute identity will, of course, reject (RT9) as incoherent because she deems statements of absolute identity, like '$x = y$', and so presumably their negations, to be incomplete and ill formed. If, however, absolute identity and therefore absolute non-identity are admitted, then (RT9) is unavoidable: according to (RT8), x is the same trinitarian person as x but not the same trinitarian person as y, so $x \neq y$. A relative identity theorist who rejects **D** is therefore committed to (RT9). Given **P**, however, we have (10) which is a contradiction. Nothing in the premises is incompatible with **R** so if this argument is sound then the RI defence of the Trinity doctrine fails – as Rea claims.

(RT10), however, follows from (RT9) only if principle **P** is admitted. And the only reason Rea gives for accepting this principle is his intuition that 'x is (absolutely) distinct from y' is synonymous [sic] with 'x is not the same being as y' – which may be anomalous.

Why should we endorse **P**? For the purposes of his argument Rea cannot appeal to any principle that is inconsistent with **R** to make the case for **P**. His aim is not to

show that RI theories, which are committed to **R**, are incoherent, unmotivated, or otherwise objectionable but rather that *even if such accounts are in good order* they cannot save the doctrine of the Trinity from logical incoherence.[10] He cannot, therefore, appeal to the following principle in support of **P**:

A: $\forall x \forall y \forall F(x \neq y \rightarrow \sim xFy)$.

A says that if x is not identical to y then it is not relatively identical to y under any sortal. It follows that if $x \neq y$ then x is not the *same being* as y. **A** therefore implies **P**. However, **A** implies that **R** is false. It says that if x and y are not absolutely identical then there is no sortal, F, such that x is the same F as y. It follows that if there is some F such that x is the same F as y then $x = y$; therefore, that it is not possible that x and y be the same F but different Gs. So, for Rea's purposes, **A** is out.

Rea, however, appears committed to a principle that *is* compatible with **R**, viz.

A′: $\forall x \forall y \forall F[(\forall z Fz \rightarrow (x \neq y \rightarrow \sim xFy)]$.

A′ says that if *everything* is an F, that is, if F is maximally general, then $x \neq y \rightarrow \sim xFy$. Assuming that *being* is maximally general, **P** follows. **A′** (or maybe a biconditional principle like it) seems to be what Rea has in mind when he writes '"being" is plausibly the most general sortal . . . Thus, "x is (absolutely) distinct from y" seems to be synonymous with "x is not the same being as y"' (Rea (2009), 258). It follows from **A′** that if a sortal is maximally general the RI predicate in which it figures is dominant, hence **P** – since *being* is maximally general.

If this is correct then even without assuming **P** (1) and (2) imply a contradiction. *Being* is, as Rea notes, maximally general: whatever is, is a being. **A′**, moreover, is compatible with **R**. It allows for the possibility that x be the same F as y but not the same G *so long as F is not maximally general.* There is, however, is no obvious reason why an R-theorist should endorse **A′**.

At this point we may as well drop **P**. It has little to recommend it and if we accept the A′, which seems to capture Rea's intuition, it is superfluous. In the following section it will be shown that this intuition should be resisted.

Generality and Dominance

Being is, indisputably, maximally general. So if **A′** is correct, then (1) and (2) imply a contradiction. But, as will be shown, A′ is false.

To make the case I first show that, given the RI-theorist's account of RI statements, sortal generality, and sortal dominance, generality does not imply dominance: assuming that G is more general that F, that x and y are Fs, and x is the same G as y, it does not follow that x is the same F as y. Second, I argue that *maximally* generality makes no difference. Assuming that x and y are Fs, and that x is the same G as y, it does not follow that x is the same F as y even if G is more general than *all* (non-maximally general) sortals.

Recall that to be an *F* is to be the same *F* as something or other. Sortal generality can therefore be understood as follows:

> **Generality:** *G* is *more general* than *F* iff ∀*x* ∃*y* (*x* is the same *F* as *y* → *x* is the same *G* as *y* but not vice versa.

That is to say, *G* is *more general* then *F* just in case anything that is an *F* is a *G*. A sortal, *G*, is maximally general if there is no sortal, *F*, that is more general than *G*.

G dominates F if being the same *G* implies being the same *F*. Given our account of RI statements, we can understand sortal dominance accordingly:

> **RI Dominance:** A sortal relative identity predicate, *same G* dominates a sortal relative identity predicate *same F* iff ∀*x* ∀*y* ∃*z* ((*x* is the same *G* as *z* and *y* is the same *G* as *z*) → (*x* is the same *F* as *z* and *y* is the same *F* as *z*)).

The antecedent says that *x* is the same *G* as *y* and the consequent says that *x* is the same *F* as *y*, hence that *same G* dominates *same F*.

A′ says that where *G* is maximally general being the same *G* implies being the same *F* (for all sortals *F* that are not themselves maximally general). Before turning our attention to A′, however, let us consider the suggestion that generality, whether maximal or not, implies dominance, that is:

> **Generality and Dominance (G&D):** If a sortal, *G*, is more general than a sortal, *F*, then the RI predicate *same G* dominates the RI predicate *same F*.

Prima facie, it looks as if **G&D** implies **A′** but not vice versa. However, arguably, if **R&D** is false there is no good reason to endorse **A′**. And, as will be shown, **G&D** is false.

Given our understanding of sortal generality and sortal dominance **G&D** says that from (3) we may infer (4):

> (3)   ∀*x* ∃*y* (*x* is the same *F* as *y* →*x* is the same *G* as *y*).
> (4)   ∀*x* ∀*y* ∃*z* (*x* is the same *G* as *z* and *y* is the same *G* as *z*) → (*x* is the same *F* as *z* and *y* is the same *F* as *z*).

(3) says that *G* is a maximally general sortal: every sortal, *F*, is either as general or less general than *G* – so every *F* is a *G*. (4) says that *same G* dominates *same F*, that is, that if for any *x, y* if *x* is the same *G* as *y* then *x* is the same *F* as *y*. (3), however, does not imply (4).

Let *F* and *G* be sortals. First, assume only that *G* is more general than F so that if an object *x* bears the *same F* relation to some *y*, it bears the *same G* relation to *y*. Suppose *a* is an *F* and *b* is an *F*, that is:

> (5)   ∃*x* (*a* is the same *F* as *x*) & ∃*x* (*b* is the same *F* as *x*).

Since *G* is more general than *F* it follows that *a* and *b* are *G*s, so

> (6)   ∃*x* (*a* is the same *G* as *x*) & ∃*x* (*b* is the same *G* as *x*).

(6) says that there is a something to which *a* bears the *same G* relation and that there is something to which *b* bears the *same G* relation. Maybe there is something to which both *a* and *b* bear the *same G* relation – but maybe there isn't. Let us say that there is such an object, *c*, to which both *a* and *b* bear the *same G* relation. That is,

(7)   *a* is the same *G* as *c* & *b* is the same *G* as *c*.

Since RI relations are equivalence relations, it follows from (7) that

(8)   *a* is the *same G* as *b*.

It does not, however, follow that *a* is the same *F* as *b*. (5) says that there is something to which *a* bears the *same F* relation and something to which *b* bears the same *F* relation. Again, maybe there is something to which *both a* and *b* bear the *same F* relation – but maybe there isn't. (5) does *not* imply

(5*) $\exists x$ (*a* is the same *F* as *x* & *b* is the same *F* as *x*).

(5) says that *a* is an *F* and *b* is an *F*, that is, that *a* is the same *F* as something or other and that *b* is the same *F* as something or other – not that there is some *x* such that *a* is the same *F* as x and *b* is the same *F* as *x*. Let us say that *a* is the same *F* as *d* and *b* is the same *F* as *e* where $d \neq e$, and that there is no object to which both *a* and *b* bear the *same F* relation. That is to say:

(9)   *a* is the same *F* as *d* and *b* is the same *F* as *e*.
(10) $\sim \exists x$ (*a* is the same *F* as *x* & *b* is the same *F* as *x*).

Since there is nothing to which both *a* and *b* bear the *same F* relation *a* does not bear the *same F* relation to *b*. That is:

(11)   *a* is not the *same F* as *b*.

a is an *F* and *b* is an *F* and *a* is the same *G* as *b* but *a* is not the *same F* as *b*. So we have a non-trivial case where the sortal *G* is more general than the sortal *F* but *same G* does not dominate *same F* – so we have a counterexample to **G&D**.

So far this shows that generality does not induce dominance: from the assumption that *G* is more general than *F*, it does not follow that *same G* dominates *same F*. Adding that *G* is *maximally* general, i.e. that it is more general than all other non-maximally general sortals as well, does not make any difference: the counterexample stills stands in the special case where *G* is maximally general.

Starting with any counterexample to **G&D** we can create a counterexample to **A′**. The current counterexample to **G&D** is the conjunction of (3), (7), (9), and (10). (3) says that *G* is more general than *F*. (7) says that *a* is the same *G* as *b*. (9) and (10) together say that *a* is an *F* and *b* is an *F* but *a* is not the *same F* as *b*. To produce a counterexample to **A′** we only need to add that in addition to being more general than *F*, *G* is also more general than all other non-maximally general sortals, and so is maximally general.

Suppose that besides *F* the only other non-maximally general sortal around is *H* and that no *F*s are *H*s. In the small world of the supposition, *G* is maximally general if, in addition to (3) we have

(12)   ∀*x* ∃*y* (*x* is the same *H* as *y* → *x* is the same *G* as *y*).

So in the impoverished language of this small world, the following story is a counterexample to **A′**:

(3) ∀*x* ∃*y* (*x* is the *same F* as *y* →*x* is the same *G* as *y*).
(12) ∀*x* ∃*y* (*x* is the *same H* as *y* → *x* is the *same G* as *y*).
(7) *a* is the *same G* as *c* & *b* is the *same G* as *c*.
(9) *a* is the same *F* as *d* and *b* is the same *F* as *e*.
(10) ∼ ∃*x* (*a* is the same *F* as *x* & *b* is the same *F* as *x*).

Since *F* and *H* are the only non-maximally general sortals around, (3) and (12) together say that *G* is maximally general. Since no *F*s are *H*s, the addition of (12) has no bearing on the truth of (7), (9), or (10). If this is correct then *G*'s being more general than *F* doesn't entail that *G* dominates *F* even where *G* is *maximally* general. **A′** is therefore false.

Relative identity redux

Relative identity solutions to the Trinity puzzle are currently out of favour because relative identity is at least mildly disreputable and, more to the point, because a number of writers have assumed that **P** is plausible and that Rea's objection is decisive. But neither Rea, nor other writers who cite his argument with approval, have offered any compelling reason to believe that **P** is true. Moreover, **A′**, which arguably, is what provides intuitive backing for **P**, is false.

I have argued that the doctrine of the Trinity, at least in so far as it entails that the Father and Son are the same being but different trinitarian persons, is coherent given a minimalist R-theory of relative identity. *Being* is, indeed, maximally general; however, as we have seen, maximal generality does not imply dominance and *same being* does not dominate *same trinitarian person.* An orthodox Christian can, therefore, without logical impropriety, hold that the Father is the same being as the Son but not the same trinitarian person.[11]

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Notes

1. I am grateful to the referee for reminding me that the Nicene Creed, while endorsing the doctrine that the trinitarian persons are one *ousia*, asserts just that the Son is 'true God from true God' and are, to that extent, non-committal about whether Father and Son are correctly described as 'one God'. The Nicene Creed, which is endorsed by most churches, is in addition at best cautious about the status of the Holy Spirit.

2. Garbacz (2002), 27.
   For some of the problems, see also Robin Le Poidevin, who, assessing the prospects for a relative identity solution to Christological problems, argues that this generates a regress.

   > [W]e cannot say or imply that the very same thing that stands in the same F-relation to y also stands in the same F-relation to something, which fails to stand in the same G-relation to y. We have to say, instead, that what stands in the same F-relation to y also stands in the same F-relation to something that stands in the F-relation, etc. But we cannot avoid use of the term 'also stands', or some equivalent expression, and this is nothing other than an expression of identity, which therefore has to be construed as relative to a sortal. In expressing this, however, we never manage to eliminate the identity-implying phrase, which means that we are embarked on regress. (Le Poidevin (2009), 182)

   Even if this regress is not sufficiently vicious to undermine theories that eschew absolute identity, such accounts require an unconventional account of reference. Daniel Howard-Synder, commenting on van Inwagen's logic of relative identity, notes:

   > [T]he concept of a singular term involves the notion of identity: if singular term *a* denotes x and also denotes y, it follows that x is identical with y. As a substitute for singular reference, an adaptation of Russell's Theory of Descriptions can be used. For example, 'The present pope is bald' could be read as 'There is an *x* such that [*x* is at present a pope, and, for any *y* (if *y* is at present a pope, then *y* is the same man as *x*), and *x* is bald].' (Howard-Snyder (2014), 10)

3. This is not an account that advocates of the standard 'absolutist' analysis of identity statements would endorse. The aim of the current discussion, however, is not to defend the relative identity theorist's account of identity statements but to show that *if* such an account is assumed the doctrine of the Trinity can be shown to be logically unobjectionable. Rea has argued that such accounts do not save the doctrine of the Trinity from logical incoherence. Rea, it will be argued, is wrong: *assuming* a relative identity theory that admits absolute identity the Trinity doctrine can be shown to be logically coherent.

4. van Inwagen notes this distinction in developing his Relative Identity Logic:

   > Consider phrases of the form 'α is the same N as β' where 'N' represents the place of a count noun. Sometimes predicates of this form are used in such a way as to imply that α and β are *N*s and

sometimes that they are not. If I say, 'Tully is the same man as Cicero,' I imply that Tully and Cicero are men. If I say, 'The Taj Mahal is the same colour as the Washington Monument', I do not imply that these two edifices are colours. Let us call a predicate of the form 'is the same N as' a *relative-identity predicate* (of 'RI-predicate') if it is satisfied only by Ns. A predicate that is not an RI-predicate we call an *ordinary* predicate. Thus, 'is the same man as' is an RI-predicate, and 'is the same colour as' is an ordinary predicate. (van Inwagen (2009), 226)

5. And metaphysical innocence was Geach's aim. Contra Quine, he argues that 'as our knowledge expands we should unhesitatingly expand our ideology, our stock of predicables, but should be much more wary about altering our ontology . . . an admirable aim; but one that we cannot attain by Quine's device of reading strict identity into I-predicables' (Geach (1967), 8–9).

6. I am grateful to the anonymous referee for this journal who points out that, historically, some pre-Nicene Fathers blocked undesirable inferences differently. So, the referee notes, Justin Martyr said that Father and Son were 'two in number', Origen characterized Father and Son as two beings ('hypostases'), and Tertullian held that while both Father and Son were divine there was a time when only the Father existed. Later theologians worried that these solutions compromised monotheism. The story I have told is a rational reconstruction – not an exegesis or historical account.

7. This is by way of rational reconstruction. 'Dominance' is van Inwagen's term.

8. Note: $\forall x \forall y \, xBy \rightarrow x \neq y$ only on the weak reading of $x \neq y$.

9. Note: given the strong reading of $x \neq y$, $\sim xPy$ *does not* imply $x \neq y$ since it does not imply that there is *no* sortal, F, such that x is the same F as y. The argument goes through only if $x \neq y$, as it occurs in **P**, is given the weak reading.

10. Rea and Brower have proposed an account of the Trinity doctrine according to which the unity of divine Persons is to be understood in terms of what they characterize as 'the Aristotelian notion of "numerical sameness without identity"' or 'accidental sameness' (Brower & Rea (2009), 264). They endorse **R** but reject the Relative Identity theorist's contention that sortal-relative identity statements are more fundamental than absolute identity statements and tell a 'supplementary story about the metaphysics underlying relative identity relations' on the grounds that endorsing **R** by itself 'leaves one, at best, with an incomplete solution to the problem of the Trinity'. The solution to the Trinity problem, on their account, is comparable to what they call the 'Aristotelian solution to the problem of material constitution'.

> The Persons of the Trinity', they write, 'can also be conceived of in terms of hylomorphic compounds . . . thus we can think of the divine essence or playing the role of matter; and we can regard the properties *being a Father, being a Son,* and *being a Spirit* as distinct forms instantiated by the divine essence. (*ibid.*, 274)

This poses the question of what a solution to the Trinity puzzle is supposed to do. I assume, contra Brower and Rea, that the 'incompleteness' to which they object is no vice and that supplementing **R** with a metaphysical story is no virtue. My purpose has just been to provide an account according to which (1) and (2) are consistent and which is, in so far as possible, free of metaphysical baggage.

11. I am grateful to Lila Luce and to the anonymous referee of this journal for comments.