God from God:
The Essential Dependence Model of Eternal Generation

Mark Makin
Torrey Honors Institute
Biola University

1. The Doctrine
The Classical Doctrine of the Trinity:
  The one God eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One substance or essence (*ousia*), three persons (*hypostases*).
Relations of Origin:
  The Son is eternally begotten of the Father.
  The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father (and the Son or through the Son).
The Doctrine of Eternal Generation:
  Two Constraints:
  – Begotten, not created or made.
  – By will or by necessity? Both!
  Minimal Statement: Necessarily, the Son depends on the Father for his existence, yet the Son exists eternally.
Why Eternal Generation Matters:
  1. Ensures equality, unity, and distinctness
  – Equality: Like Father, like Son
  – Unity: Bound together by relation of origin
  – Distinctness: Unbegotten Father, begotten Son
  2. Affirmed by the Church for 1700 years
  3. Underlies the gospel

2. Objections
No Biblical Warrant:
  The doctrine of eternal generation finds no support in Scripture.
Unintelligible:
  The doctrine of eternal generation is meaningless or philosophically incoherent.

Entails Subordinationism:
  The doctrine of eternal generation entails that the Son is not fully divine.
  The Son lacks the divine attributes of:
  1. Self-existence (aseity)
  – Aseity = existing without being caused by anything else
  – If the Father causes the Son's existence, then the Son lacks aseity.
  2. Necessary existence
  – The Son exists contingently rather than necessarily.

3. Bad Models
Causal Dependence Model:
  Necessarily, the Father causes the Son to exist.
  Problems:
  – Causation is widely regarded to be diachronic and to relate events.
  – Since aseity is defined in terms of causation, the Son lacks aseity.
Modal Dependence Model:
  The Son modally existentially depends on the Father. Necessarily, the Son exists only if the Father exists.
  Problems:
  – Not asymmetric: The Father also modally depends on the Son.
  – Spurious eternal generation: The Son modally depends on the number 2.
Grounding Model:
  The Father grounds the Son.
  Problems:
  – Many regard grounding as useless and unintelligible.
  – Cannot account for the difference between eternal generation and eternal procession.

4. The Essential Dependence Model
Essence:
  I favor a definitional account of essence on which essence is taken as a primitive. The essence of an entity is simply *what the entity is*, or *what it is to be the entity*.

Real Definition:

A real definition is a proposition representing the essence of an entity. The definiens will characterize the essence of the definiendum. Typically of the form <To be x is to be y>, where 'x' is the definiendum and 'y' is the definiens. The definiens specifies both the genus and the differentia.

Essential Dependence:

Where 'x' and 'y' represent entities from any ontological category:

Rigid Essential Dependence: y rigidly essentially depends on x $=_{df.}$ x is a constituent of a real definition of y.

– Example: Obama and {Obama}.

In cases of generic essential dependence, one entity essentially depends on a type or sort of entity that satisfies predicate F, namely, *some F or other* (call these Fs):

Generic Essential Dependence: y generically essentially depends on x $=_{df.}$ (i) Fs are a constituent of a real definition of y, and (ii) x satisfies F.

– Example: The blueness of my sweater and its navyness.

Essential Dependence Model:

Eternal generation is a form of rigid essential dependence. To say that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father is to say that the Son rigidly essentially depends on the Father. More formally:

The Son is eternally begotten of the Father $=_{df.}$ The Father is a constituent of a real definition of the Son, and the Son exists eternally.

Real Definition of the Son:

To be the Son is to be the divine person who *is the image of* the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

Real Definition of the Father:

To be the Father is to be the divine person *on whom all things ultimately depend* (Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 2:10).

5. Virtues

Checklist:

▢ Not diachronic: The Son and the Father exist simultaneously.

▢ Can relate persons: Essential dependence can relate anything.

▢ Asymmetric: The Son essentially depends on the Father, but not vice versa.

▢ Precludes spurious eternal generation: The Son does not essentially depend on the number 2, for instance.

Intelligible:

Essential dependence is meaningful and philosophically coherent, as demonstrated by other cases of essential dependence. If other cases of essential dependence are intelligible, why not this one?

– Bonus! Essential dependence is not philosophically *ad hoc*.

Avoids Subordinationism:

Necessary Existence:

Essential dependence is perfectly compatible with necessary existence. Example: the number 2 and {2}.

Self-Existence (aseity):

Aseity = existing without *being caused by* anything else

Essential dependence is not a form of causation. In no way does it imply that the Father causes the Son's existence. Thus, the Son possesses aseity.

Objection: Aseity = existing without *depending on* anything else. The Son essentially depends on the Father, so the Son does not truly possess aseity.

Reply: The Son possesses aseity with respect to the divine essence, but not with respect to his person (John Calvin). In other words, the Son essentially depends on the Father with respect to his *individual* essence, but not with respect to his *general* essence.

Different Essences Objection:

Since the Father and the Son have different real definitions, they must have different divine essences. Thus, the Father and the Son are not *homoousious*.

Reply: The Father and the Son have different *individual* essences but share the same *general* essence.

Eternal Procession of the Holy Spirit:

To be the Spirit is to be the divine person who is the breath of _____.

– Differentiates eternal generation and eternal procession: Generation is "imagey," and procession is "breathy," as it were.

– Neutral on the *filioque* controversy: Fill in the blank however you'd like.

Concluding Thoughts:

In the end, the doctrine of eternal generation, like all other doctrines, stands or falls with Scripture. My model shows that eternal generation is philosophically coherent and theologically sound. If there are good reasons to reject eternal generation (and I don't think there are), they won't be philosophical.