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**Simple Trinitarianism**

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**Introduction**

Thesis:

We can use Semantics in multiple ways to allow us to say that Trinitarian sentences are true, while claiming that God is simple and the Persons of the Trinity are not identified with any entities in our ontology.

Aims:

My central aim is not to convince you that Simple Trinitarianism is true. Rather, it is to highlight the extent to which Semantics can do work in addressing the problem of the Trinity, giving us greater freedom with respect to Ontology.

Outline:

1. I’ll describe one-self and many-self responses to the problem of the Trinity, and then present Simple Trinitarianism and show how it relates attempts to find a middle ground between those responses.
2. I’ll describe two options for a semantics to supplement Simple Trinitarianism. I am not arguing for any particular semantics, just establishing that there are multiple options. The first is a “feature-placing language” based on the model given to us by Hawthorne and Cortens to handle lack of reference for Ontological Nihilists.
3. The second semantics I’ll consider is presented by Andrew Bacon, endorsing Free Logic and positing meaningful empty names.
4. Finally, I’ll respond to some questions about and objections to Simple Trinitarianism, including the question of how this relates to Leftow’s Latin Trinitarianism, the issue of whether a Simple Trinitarian God is a Person, and the extent to which this view is really Trinitarian at all.

**Simple Trinitarianism Introduced**

The Trinitarian Sentences (from the Athanasian Creed):

1. There is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.
2. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God.
3. There are not three Gods, but one God.

But: it looks like the Trinitarian wants each of three things to be God, but only one thing to be God.

One-Self Views:

God is one Person who plays three distinct roles, or has three distinct aspects. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each strictly identical to God (under an aspect or in a role). Alternatively, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be identified with modes or events, or the roles that God plays.

Social Trinitarianism:

There are three distinct, Divine centers of consciousness, corresponding to each of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God may be a community of these, or a fusion of them, or there may simply be three Gods.

Simple Trinitarianism:

God is mereologically simple. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not identical to anything in our ontology. However, reality has (in some sense) the complexity posited by Social Trinitarians, and this in combination with a suitable semantics allows us to truly assert most or all of the Trinitarian claims.

**Ontological Nihilism and Lack of Reference: Hawthorne and Cortens**

Popular examples of true sentences without referential subject-terms:

1. The average American adult male has 2.3 children.
2. It is raining.

Sentences like (2), arguably, merely involve saying that certain properties are instantiated (perhaps in contextually salient locations) and do not commit us to the existence of any material entities. These are called “feature-placing sentences”.

Ontological Nihilism: No material objects exist.

1. There is a white pebble.
2. It is pebbling whitely there.

The Ontological Nihilist’s 3 steps to a friendly semantics:

1. Build a language that includes only feature-placing sentences.
2. Develop a translation scheme for translating all of our true sentences in ordinary language into this Nihilistic language.
3. Claim that the Nihilistic language more perspicuously depicts reality.

Options for general principles (just a start):

* Sentences of the apparent form “*x* is *F*” correspond to feature-placing sentences of the form “it is *x*-ing *F-*ly”.
* Sentences of the apparent form *xRy*” correspond to feature-placing sentences of the form “it is *x*ing *R-y-*ly” or “it is *x*ing *y*-*R*ing-ly”.
* The above relational sentences may be further translated into sentences of the form “it is *x*ing *R-its-y*ing*-*ly” if there is no actual object corresponding to the object of those sentences.

Sentences we’d like to assert about the Trinity:

1. The Father is uncreated.
2. The Father created the world.
3. The Father begot the Son.
4. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.
5. There is one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.

Translated:

1. It Fathered uncreatedly.
2. It Fathered world-creatingly. (Or perhaps: It Fathered creating-of-the-world-ly.)
3. It Fathered Its-Sonning-begottenly. (Or perhaps: It Fathered begotting-of-Its-Sonning-ly.)
4. It Holy-Spirited From-Its-Fathering-and-Its-Sonning-Proceedingly. (Or perhaps: it Holy-Spirited Proceedingly from Its Fathering and Its Sonning.)
5. It Holy-Spirited exactly once.

Existential Claims:

1. Pebbles exist.
2. It is pebbling at least once.
3. The Father exists.
4. It Fathers. (Or perhaps: Its Fathering exists.)
5. \*There are a thousand pebbles in my shoe.
6. \*Twelve Fathers created the world.

Shortcomings:

* A story needs to be told about anaphoric predication
* There may be a true sense of “there are three Gods”, i.e., “it’s God-ing thrice”, that follows from “it’s Fathering God-ily, it’s Sonning God-ily, and it’s Holy-Spiriting God-ily”

Perhaps the proponent of this semantics has a way to handle counting that blocks this.

But then they will lose the inference to “there are two students” from “it is Maegan- ing student-ily and it is Renee-ing student-ily”, as well as the inference to “there are three Persons” from “it is Fathering Person-ly, it is Sonning Person-ly, and it is Holy- Spiriting Person-ly”

**Free Logic and Empty Names: Bacon**

Sentences with empty names:

1. Sherlock Holmes is a detective.
2. Vulcan is a planet between Mercury and the Sun.

Rules of Classical Logic:

* Existential Generalisation (EG): ϕ*a* implies∃xϕx
* Universal Instantiation (UI): ∀*x* ϕ*x* implies ϕ*a*

Troubling Inferences:

1. Pegasus is a winged horse.
2. So: A winged horse exists.
3. Everything isn’t a winged horse.
4. So: Pegasus isn’t a winged horse.
5. Everything exists.
6. So: Pegasus exists.

Problems with non-empty names:

1. Everything exists.
2. So: Timothy Williamson exists. (But this shouldn’t be a theorem of logic!)

Bacon argues: these problems all arise from a general problem of about quantification.

Common response: Free Logic!

* Free Existential Generalisation (FEG): (ϕ*a* ∧ ∃*x*(*a*=*x*)) implies ∃*y* ϕ*y*
* Free Universal Instantiation (FUI): ∀*y*(∀*x* ϕ*x* implies ϕ*y*)

Bacon argues that not only should we adopt such a Free Logic, we should adopt a *positive* Free Logic, on which at least some statements involving empty names to be true. Such as:

1. Botticelli drew Venus.
2. The ancient Greeks worshipped Zeus.

We want to say these differ in meaning:

1. Pegasus lives at 221B Baker Street.
2. Sherlock Holmes lives at 221B Baker Street.

So, says Bacon, we should take empty names to make semantic contributions to their sentences.

Bacon has a non-existential notion of reference, as similar to *depiction*. Thus, from

1. “Zeus” refers to Zeus.

we cannot infer

1. There is something that is the referent of “Zeus”.

Establishing reference/schreference of empty names:

Like reference for non-empty names, via a dubbing or initial baptism

* often involving gesture, definite description, or a network of initial uses
* often done with suppositions

Suppositions and ties to how the world is:

1. The Ancient Greeks worhsipped Zeus.
2. \*Zeus was a human with a short lifespan.
3. If Greek mythology were true, then Zeus would be a human with a short lifespan.

Application to the Trinity:

With a *positive* Free Logic, we can truly assert

1. The Son is begotten.
2. *Bs*

Using Free Logic, we can block the inference to:

1. ∃*x* *Bx*.

With a non-existential notion of reference:

1. ‘The Son’ refers to the Son.

needn’t entail

1. ∃*x* *x*=*s*

Quite helpfully, these tools allow us to say:

1. The Father is a God, and the Son is a God, and it’s not the case that the Father is identical to the Son
2. G*f* ∧ G*s* ∧ ¬(*f*=*s*)

But we can block the inference to:

1. There is more than one thing that is a God.
2. ∃*x*, *y* | *x*≠*y* ∧ G*x* ∧ G*y*

Semantic contribution of the names (a partial picture):

* “The Father” refers to what created the world.
* “The Son” refers to something that was begotten by the Father.
* “The Holy Spirit” refers to something proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Shortcomings: We cannot assert

1. The Father is identical to God.
2. *f=g*
3. The Father exists.
4. ∃*x* *x*=*f*

**Questions, Objections, and Replies**

**What are extended simples?**

* *x* is an extended simple =df *x* fills an extended region (of space, time, or spacetime), and *x* has no parts distinct from it.

Two options for how a simple may fill an extended region:

* spanning *r*: filling *r* while not having any parts that are exactly located at any proper subregions of *r*.
* multilocating across *r*: filling *r* while being exactly located at (at least) each of two distinct subregions of *r* (which fuse to make *r*).

(Note: neither spanning nor multilocating requires being mereologically simple.)

Ways to object:

* Extended simples are impossible! (Perhaps even: analytically impossible, if the very notion of extension involves non-zero distance between distinct parts.)
* It is impossible for something to fail to be wholly material if it does not have a wholly immaterial part.

**How does Simple Trinitarianism relate to Leftow’s Latin Trinitarianism?**

Similarities:

* Simple Trinitarians have the option of agreeing with Latin Trinitarians that God multilocates (or does something analogous), and that this helps to explain the truth of the claims in Trinitarian creeds.

Differences:

* Latin Trinitarians are not committed to the claim that God is mereologically simple.
* Latin Trinitarians have a place in their ontology for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (This leads to the objection that Latin Trinitarianism involves conflating the Persons. Simple Trinitarianism avoids this objection, though I suspect Trinitarians will find the medicine worse than the malady.)

**Can a Simple Trinitarian say God is a Person?**

Worries:

* The Simple Trinitarian can say that the Father is a Person, the Son is a Person, and the Holy Spirit is a Person. Depending on their semantics, however, they may not be able to say that there exists a Person that is identical with the Father (or with the Son, or with the Holy Spirit). If they are able to say it, they will have to also say that this is not the most perspicuous description of the world.
* Given that God is a simple entity consisting of what looks like a community of three Persons, establishing that God is a Person is non-trivial.

Response:

* God has the requisite properties for Personhood. (God instantiates *thinking*, *loving*, *being morally responsible*, *being Divine*,etc.)
* God is the best candidate in the vicinity for being a Person.

Problem:

* Strange view: when two people get married, those people go out of existence and the fusion of those people is the only object left in the vicinity.

Terrible Argument:

1. Some person in the vicinity of Brangelina raises children, interacts with the press, and so on.
2. But there is no person, *Brad* or *Angelina*.
3. Instead, the only candidate in the vicinity for being a person is Brangelina.
4. So, we should take Brangelina to be a person.

Options for Response:

* Deny they are analogous. (The members of the Trinity have much closer connections than Brad and Angelina.)
* Deny that God is a Divine Person.

**How can this possibly be Trinitarian?**

Worry:

* Depending on the semantics, we may not be able to capture the truth of “The Son exists”.
* Even if we can give a semantics on which this sentence is true, either there will also be a sense of the sentence that is either false or fails to perspicuously describe the world.

Thus, Simple Trinitarianism seems to get the wrong results with respect to something that is *central* to Trinitarianism, namely: *the existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*!

Response:

* What is central to Trinitarianism is a certain picture of the world, on which God has a certain degree of complexity, relating to us and the world in particular and varied ways. Simple Trinitarianism does capture that complexity.
* The additional claim, that there really are *objects* rather than merely *portions of reality* corresponding to what we call “the Father”, “the Son”, and “the Holy Spirit” is not a crucial component of Trinitarianism.

Simple Trinitarianism is not for everyone. It will be most motivated for:

1. A Trinitarian who wants to claim that God is simple.
2. A one-self theorist who is reluctant to identify the Persons with entities such as properties or events, or with one another.
3. A Social Trinitarian worried about positing three bearers of the Divine attributes.
4. A Trinitarian who already accepts a restrictive ontology such as Monism, Ontological Nihilism, or Compositional Nihilism, and nonetheless says that most of our sentences about ordinary objects are true.

**Works Cited / Relevant Papers**

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