

THE PROBLEM WITH SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM: A REPLY TO WIERENGA

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In a recent article, Edward Wierenga defends a version of Social Trinitarianism according to which the Persons of the Trinity form a unique society of really distinct divine beings, each of whom has its own exemplification of divinity. In this paper, I call attention to several philosophical and theological difficulties with Wierenga's account, as well as to a problem that such difficulties pose for Social Trinitarianism generally. I then briefly suggest what I take to be a more promising approach to the Trinity.

In a recent article, "Trinity and Polytheism," Edward Wierenga claims to develop a form of Social Trinitarianism that is both theologically and philosophically acceptable.¹ The account is theologically acceptable, he suggests, because it (i) avoids the heresy of modalism (i.e., the view that there is only one person in God), (ii) avoids the heresy of polytheism (i.e., the view that there is more than one God), and (iii) fits well with traditional formulations of the doctrine such as the Athanasian Creed. He suggests that the account is philosophically acceptable because it renders the Trinity logically coherent and does so without going to extreme lengths such as denying the identity of indiscernibles or rejecting the classical notion of identity in favor of some form of relative identity.

I agree with Wierenga that his account of the Trinity is logically coherent and avoids at least one of the standard Trinitarian heresies, namely, modalism. Nonetheless, he is wrong to suppose either that his account fits well with traditional formulations of the doctrine or that it

succeeds in avoiding polytheism. Indeed, it seems to me that, like those accounts of the Trinity that Wierenga criticizes, his own account is guilty of going to extreme lengths to render the doctrine coherent. In what follows, I undertake to defend these claims and, on the basis of my defense, to identify a problem for Social Trinitarianism generally. I conclude by providing a brief sketch of what I take to be a much more promising strategy for making sense of the Trinity.

I. Wierenga's Account of the Trinity

As Wierenga points out,² traditional formulations of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity require us to accept each of the following claims:

- (1) There are three really distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- (2) Each of the Persons is God.
- (3) There is only one God.

As he also points out, the problem with these claims is that their conjunction appears to be incoherent. Claims (1) and (2) appear to entail polytheism, whereas claim (3) explicitly denies it. In developing his account of the Trinity, Wierenga offers an interpretation designed to show that, despite appearances, the conjunction of these claims is perfectly intelligible.

The key to Wierenga's account lies in his interpretation of the second claim. As he sees it, claim (1) may be taken straightforwardly to deny the identity of the Persons of the Trinity: the Father is not identical with the Son, and the Holy Spirit is not identical with the Father or the Son. Likewise, claim (3) may be taken straightforwardly to assert the truth of monotheism: there exists one and only one God. It is only claim (2), he suggests, that requires any significant elucidation.

Although it is natural to read (2) as asserting the identity of each of the Persons with God, Wierenga thinks that it should not be interpreted in this way. On the contrary, he says that it should be interpreted as predicating a certain property of Persons. Even here, however, he thinks we must be careful. For the property being predicated is not deity (i.e., the property of being God), but divinity (i.e., the property of being divine)—where he conceives of divinity and deity as distinct properties. That is to say, Wierenga thinks that (2) is best interpreted as the claim that:

(2*) Each of the Persons is divine.

It is not hard to appreciate the motivation for this interpretation. If it is correct, and there really is a distinction to be drawn between divinity and deity, then the conjunction of (1)-(3) no longer seem so problematic. For as Wierenga points out, we can now multiply divine beings without multiplying Gods. Indeed, as he sees it, claims (1) and (2) are best understood as asserting the existence of three divine beings, whereas (3) is best understood as asserting the existence of a single deity or God, with the result that “the number of distinct divine persons is three; the number of Gods is one.”³

Of course, this interpretation places significant weight on the distinction between the property of being divine and that of being God. But how exactly are we to understand that distinction? After all, one might have thought that every divine person is a God, and vice versa. In response, Wierenga has the following to say: “a person is divine just in case that person has the divine attributes”—that is, just in case that person possesses such properties as omnipotence, omniscience, being uncreated, eternal, and so on.⁴ By contrast, he says: “[a person] is a God just in case it is God”—that is, just in case it is identical with God.⁵ On Wierenga’s account, therefore, to say that there are three really distinct divine persons but only one God is just to say

that, although there are three really distinct beings each of whom possesses the properties of being all-powerful, all-knowing, uncreated, etc., there is only one thing—the complex of which these three distinct beings are the constituents—that possesses the property of being identical with God.

II. Problems with Wierenga's Account

With this understanding of Wierenga's account in hand, we are now in a position to turn to its evaluation. As I have already indicated, I don't think there is anything obviously absurd or logically incoherent about Wierenga's account. Indeed, if the coherence of his distinction between divinity and deity is granted, then his account clearly avoids the charge of modalism (since it entails the existence of three distinct Persons in God, which is precisely what the modalist denies). Even so, it still falls far short of the theological and philosophical adequacy that he claims for it—as I shall now argue.

2.1 Theological Problems. To begin, let us consider how Wierenga's account fits with the Athanasian Creed, which he rightly takes to be representative of traditional formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. As we have seen, Wierenga thinks that claims such as (2) are most naturally interpreted along the lines of (2*). Thus, when the Athanasian Creed states 'Ita deus Pater, deus Filius, deus Spiritus sanctus' ("The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God"), he claims that "the most plausible way to interpret it ... is to take the first noun, 'deus' as expressing a property of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That property is most naturally taken to be divinity, the property of being divine."⁶

Even if we grant that the term 'deus' or 'God' in such contexts expresses a property possessed by each of the Persons of the Trinity, it is extremely implausible to say that the property it expresses is divinity, where this is to be understood as a property distinct from deity. If there really were a distinction to be drawn between divinity and deity, and if the Creed writers really intended to be predicating divinity rather than deity of the Persons, wouldn't we have expected them to use the Latin term 'divinus' rather than 'deus'? At one point in his discussion, Wierenga addresses the worry that "if the Latin had intended to make a predication [rather than an identity statement], it could have used the adjective 'divinus' [rather than 'deus']."⁷ Evidently, however, he does not recognize that a similar worry can be raised against his own final interpretation.

Of course, one could reply that the use of the term 'deus' in the Creed is a mere slip. But that, too, seems implausible. If the individual or individuals responsible for framing the Athanasian Creed really had in mind a sharp distinction of the sort Wierenga is imagining, wouldn't they have been careful to employ it, especially in writing a Creed? Moreover, given that the use of 'deus' is not restricted to the Athanasian Creed, but is part-and-parcel of traditional formulations of the Trinity, the suggestion that the use of the term deus is a slip is all the more implausible. Surely, not all the Creed writers are guilty of the same mistake.

It is significant, I think, that even if the Creed writers had employed 'divinus', where they actually have 'deus', we would still have grounds for rejecting Wierenga's interpretation. Judging by the way these terms are used in Latin, there is no sharp distinction to be drawn between the property of being divine (divinus) and that of being a God (deus). Indeed, the terms 'divinus' and 'deus' seem to me to function in Latin in much the way that 'human' and 'man' function in English (at least when the term 'man' is being used gender neutrally, for example, to

translate the Latin term 'homo'). In English, the terms 'human' and 'man' differ grammatically, and perhaps also in certain of their connotations; nonetheless, they express the same properties. To be human just is to be a man (in the gender neutral or archaic sense of the term). The case is much the same with divinus and deus: to be divine (divinus) just is to be a God (deus). But if this is right, then attributing a sharp distinction between divinity and deity to the individuals responsible for the traditional formulations of the Trinity is no more plausible than attributing a sharp distinction between being human and being a man to ordinary speakers of English (or even English-speaking philosophers and theologians).

It turns out that Wierenga's interpretation of (2) is not the only aspect of his account that conflicts with the Athanasian Creed. As some of the other passages quoted in his paper make clear,⁸ the Creed requires us to accept not only that each of the persons is God, but also that

(4) Each of the persons is almighty and eternal, and

(5) There are not three almighties, nor three eternals.

On their most natural interpretation, these sorts of claims appear to assert the following: although each of the Persons has the divine attributes, it is not the case that each has its own distinct exemplification of them. Thus, just as there are not three Gods, but only one God, so too, there are not three exemplifications of being almighty or being eternal, but only one exemplification of each. And yet it is hard to see how Wierenga can account for this. As we have seen, in order to explain how each of the persons is God, and yet that there is only one God, he denies that the term 'God' strictly applies to the persons at all. Thus, when the Creed says that each of the persons is God, Wierenga takes this to mean that each of them is divine. This strategy won't work, however, in the case of the divine attributes. According to Wierenga, each of the persons literally has each of the divine attributes (this is precisely what makes them divine). But this

already commits him to the existence of three almighties and three eternal, as well as three exemplifications of every other such divine attribute. Indeed, on his account, it is hard to see how anything other than the persons exemplify the divine attributes, except in some wholly derivative sense.

For all these reasons, I think there is a genuine question whether Wierenga's account can even be thought of as providing a consistent interpretation of traditional formulations of the Trinity, not to say the best or most natural interpretation of them. For on his interpretation, the traditional claim at (2) conflicts with that at (5).

A further problem concerns the orthodoxy of Wierenga's account. Orthodoxy requires us to say that God is divine being. But if Wierenga is right, and only the Persons can literally be said to have the divine attributes, then there is a perfectly good sense in which God is not divine on his account. Of course, he could respond by pointing out that there is a derivative sense in which God is divine (since God is composed of three divine individuals who are literally divine). Perhaps he will say that this is all that's required to make sense of orthodoxy. It is not clear to me that this response is adequate.⁹ But even if it were, it would not remove the threat of unorthodoxy. Indeed, it would seem to exacerbate it. For if God is divine, where God is understood as complex distinct from but composed of the divine Persons, then it would follow that there are four divine beings. But such a view certainly seems polytheistic—indeed, tetra-theistic as opposed to just tri-theistic.

This objection brings us to what is, perhaps, the chief theological difficulty with Wierenga's account. Wierenga is, of course, at pains to show that his account can avoid the charge of polytheism, on the grounds that while it allows for more than one divine being it admits the existence of one and only one God. His defense, however, assumes that polytheism is

just the view that there are multiple Gods in his technical sense of ‘God’. In this sense, as we have seen, ‘God’ applies only to that which is identical with God. But, then, as Wierenga understands it, polytheism is logically impossible and hence trivially false, since it is logically impossible for more than one thing to be identical with God. Needless to say, this understanding of polytheism marks a fairly radical departure from the traditional understanding of that view. As I pointed out earlier, there is no evidence to suggest that the early Church fathers would accept any sharp distinction between being a God and being divine. On the contrary, they would appear to think of multiple Gods as requiring the existence of multiple divine beings. Moreover, the Creeds themselves seem to presuppose that polytheism is logically, or at least conceptually, possible. After all, it is not as if claims such as “And yet there are not three Gods, but there is one God” are naturally interpreted to mean “And yet there are not three things identical to God (because that’s absurd), but only one thing identical to God”! All of this suggests that Wierenga’s defense does nothing to remove the charge of polytheism as polytheism is traditionally understood.

But perhaps it will be said that there is a way to reconcile Wierenga’s account with the more traditional understanding of polytheism. For it is always possible to distinguish being a God (with a big ‘g’) from being a god (with a little ‘g’) and then take polytheism to be the view that there are many (little ‘g’) gods—that is, many gods of the sort spoken about in ancient Greece and Rome (i.e., non-supreme beings). The early Church fathers and Creed writers would certainly have opposed polytheism in this sense. But, then, isn’t this understanding of polytheism sufficient to show that Wierenga’s account can avoid the kind of polytheism that Christians have historically wanted to resist?

Here again, I think the answer must be ‘no’. Although the early Church and Creed writers were, no doubt, opposed to polytheism of this sort, it does not appear to be the only—or even the primary—target of their opposition, at least in such documents as the Athanasian Creed. For if it were, we would be forced to say that there is an equivocation on the term ‘God’ in claims such as “And yet there are not three Gods, but there is one God”. But this seems implausible. The fact that such documents commonly speak of monotheism and polytheism in the same breath strongly suggests that they take these views to be species of the same genus—namely, theism—where this understood as the view that there is one or more Gods in some single sense of ‘God’.

In the end, therefore, it would seem that polytheism is best interpreted as the view that there are many divine beings, and hence that Wierenga’s account does entail polytheism. But then, even if Wierenga’s account is logically coherent and can avoid the charge of modalism, it must still be regarded as theologically unacceptable.

2.2 Philosophical Problems. I’ve already indicated why the distinction on which Wierenga’s account turns, namely, that between divinity and deity, strikes me as both historically and theologically dubious. I now want to indicate, however, why that same distinction also seems problematic to me from a purely philosophical point of view.

The main problem here is that the distinction itself seems entirely unmotivated. I, for example, cannot think of any reason for recognizing it apart from the desire to preserve the coherence of the Trinity. Of course, if recognizing this distinction were the only way to make sense of the Trinity, then assuming one has good reason to accept the doctrine itself, one might have good reason to recognize the distinction. But this is not the only way to make sense of the

doctrine (more on this below). Moreover, given how artificial or unnatural the distinction itself is—as artificial or unnatural as it would be to distinguish the property of being human from being a man—it is all the more difficult to understand the motivation for introducing it.

The lack of independent motivation for Wierenga’s central distinction, together with the untoward theological implications it brings with it (mentioned in section 2.1 above), suggests a respect in which his account of the Trinity compares unfavorably even with those accounts that he criticizes as “going to extreme lengths” philosophically. Consider, for example, those accounts that reject the identity of indiscernibles. The rejection of this principle may in some sense be considered extreme (though I myself do not think it is). And yet, at least in the case of this principle, there are independent philosophical grounds for rejecting it.¹⁰ Indeed, I suspect that there are many who reject it despite the fact that they have no particular interest in philosophy of religion whatsoever. Again, consider those accounts that adopt a ‘Relative-Identity’ approach to the Trinity. I agree with Wierenga that such accounts qualify as philosophically extreme. And yet, at least in their case, their proponents often argue for the need to invoke the notion of relative identity in purely non-theological contexts, and hence in contexts having nothing whatsoever to do with the Trinity.¹¹ They may, of course, be wrong about the need to invoke relative identity in such contexts (I myself think they are). Nonetheless, their attempt to establish this need shows that their approach to the Trinity, unlike Wierenga’s, can at least escape the charge of being entirely ad hoc.

It seems to me, therefore, that like those accounts that Wierenga criticizes, his own account is guilty of going to extreme lengths to render the doctrine of the Trinity coherent. Indeed, by resting his account on a distinction that is both historically and theologically dubious, as well as philosophically problematic, his account seems to me more extreme in certain ways

than the accounts that he criticizes. I realize, of course, that this sort of judgment depends on philosophical intuitions about what counts as extreme—intuitions that may not be shared by others. Nonetheless, in light of what we've already seen, it seems safe to say that, quite apart from any theological worries, there are significant philosophical costs associated with Wierenga's account.

III. Social Trinitarianism and its Alternatives

As Wierenga himself points out, his account of the Trinity is intended to be a version of Social Trinitarianism—the view that the persons of the Trinity form a society of really distinct divine beings, each member of which has its own exemplification of divinity.¹² It is no accident, therefore, that the sorts of problems I have identified suggest a deeper problem with Social Trinitarianism itself.

Briefly stated, the problem is this. Insofar as Social Trinitarianism is committed to the existence of three distinct persons each of whom has its own divinity, it seems to face a dilemma: it must either draw a distinction like Wierenga's between divinity and deity, or not. If it does draw such a distinction, it will be able to preserve monotheism of a certain sort (i.e., the existence of a single God or deity), but only at the cost of falling into the sorts of theological and philosophical problems mentioned above. On the other hand, if it refuses to draw such a distinction, then evidently it will be forced to admit that every divine being is a God, and hence will fall into some form of polytheism.

As is well known, Social Trinitarianism is one of two main strategies in the contemporary literature for making sense of the Trinity—the other being Relative-Identity Theory, which we have already had occasion to mention. If these two strategies represented the only strategies for

making sense of the doctrine, then the force of my criticisms might be mitigated to some extent. After all, it might be said that although both of these strategies have their difficulties, Social Trinitarianism is still the better of the two. Obviously this is not the place to develop in detail an alternative to the standardly recognized approaches to Trinity. Still, since the existence of such an alternative is relevant to the evaluation of my criticisms of both Wierenga's account of the Trinity and Social Trinitarianism generally—and since this alternative strikes me as superior to both its competitors—I will conclude by briefly calling attention to its basic outline.¹³

As we have seen, the problem of the Trinity stems from its requirement that we accept each member of an apparently inconsistent triad:

- (1) There are three really distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- (2) Each of the Persons is God.
- (3) There is only one God.

Social Trinitarians and Relative-Identity theorists both solve the problem at least in part by denying that the words 'is God' in claims such as (2) mean 'is absolutely identical with God'. Thus, Social Trinitarians (such as Wierenga) take the 'is' in 'is God' to be the 'is' of predication, whereas Relative-Identity theorists take it to be the 'is' of relative identity. The alternative that I want to consider provides us with yet another way to read such claims, one which takes the 'is' in question to be what we might call the 'is' of numerical sameness (without identity).

Some philosophers, such as Aristotle, have argued that if we are to make sense of our ordinary counting practices, especially with respect to material objects, we must introduce a form of sameness without identity.¹⁴ Consider a pedestal on which there sits a bronze statue of the Greek goddess, Athena, and nothing else. How many objects are there on this pedestal? Our common sense intuitions would lead us to count one and only one object (since the statue and the

lump of bronze of which it is constituted share all the same material parts). And yet our philosophical intuitions would lead us to distinguish at least two objects (since the statue and the lump of bronze have different essential properties, as is clear from the fact that lumps of bronze can survive being melted down and recast, whereas statues cannot). According to Aristotle, we can preserve what is right about both sets of intuitions if we are prepared to say that the relation between material objects and their constituent matter is a variety of numerical sameness. As he likes to put it, statues and lumps are one in number but not one in being—that is, distinct but to be counted as one.¹⁵

No doubt, the idea that there is a form of sameness that falls short of identity will strike many, if not most, as highly counterintuitive. Such a criticism loses its force, however, once it is recognized that every way of explaining our ordinary counting practices involves something equally counterintuitive.¹⁶ In any case, what is important for our purposes is to recognize that allowing for numerical sameness without identity provides yet another way of resolving the problem of the Trinity—one that is no more extreme than the alternatives and has clear advantages over both. Thus, on the alternative that I am proposing, the words ‘is God’ in claims such as (2) should be interpreted to mean ‘is numerically the same as (but not identical with) God’. But this by itself provides us with all we need to solve the apparent inconsistency of (1)-(3). For we can now grant that the Persons of the Trinity are non-identical, and hence distinct as required by (1); at the same time, however, we can also grant that they are each numerically the same as the one and only God, and hence that each of them is God and that there is only one God, as required by (2) and (3).

Obviously, much more would have to be said before anything like a complete evaluation of this Aristotelian account of the Trinity would be possible. But even this brief sketch

highlights certain advantages it has over its rivals. Unlike Social Trinitarianism, it is clearly compatible with the view that there is exactly one divine being or deity (since it entails the existence of one and only divine being); and unlike Relative-Identity Theory, it clearly has application outside the context of the Trinity. Whatever the ultimate verdict, I hope to have presented enough of the account to show that the mere rejection of Relative-Identity theory does not by itself require the acceptance of Social Trinitarianism, its standardly recognized alternative.¹⁷

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NOTES

¹ Edward Wierenga, “Trinity and Polytheism,” Faith and Philosophy \$\$\$

² Wierenga, section 3 [ms, pp. 4-6].

³ Wierenga, [ms, p.13]; emphasis mine.

⁴ Wierenga, [ms, p. 13].

⁵ Wierenga, [ms, p. 16].

⁶ Wierenga, [ms, p. 15].

⁷ Wierenga [ms., p. 14].

⁸ Cf. Wierenga, [ms, pp. 3-4].

⁹ Compare the quotation from Augustine, which Wierenga cites approvingly, that requires that the Trinity itself “is the one and only true God” (ibid. [ms, p. 10]).

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., Max Black, “The Identity of Indiscernibles,” Mind 61 (1952): 152-164; and Dean W. Zimmerman, “Distinct Indiscernibles and the Bundle Theory,” Mind 106 (1997): 305-309.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Geach’s classic discussion of relative identity and its application to the Trinity in Peter Geach and G. E. M. Anscombe, Three Philosophers (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), pp. 86-88, and 118-120.

¹² Cf. Wierenga, [ms, n. 23]

¹³ This “third” alternative was first suggested to me by Peter Abelard’s discussion of the Trinity; cf. my discussion in “Abelard on the Trinity,” Cambridge Companion to Abelard, eds. Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfooy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). For a more complete defense of this view, in a non-historical context, see Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, “Material Constitution and the Trinity” (forthcoming this journal), a version of which was

presented at the Society of Christian Philosophers Midwest Regional Meeting, Indiana University, September 2002.

¹⁴ For relevant texts and discussion, see Michael Rea, “Sameness Without Identity: An Aristotelian Solution to the Problem of Material Constitution,” Ratio 11 (new series, 1998): 316-328.

¹⁵ Cf. Topics A7, 103a23-31; Metaphysics D6, 1015b16-22, 1016b32-1017a6.

¹⁶ As the literature on material constitution makes clear. See Michael Rea, “The Problem of Material Constitution,” The Philosophical Review 104 (1995): 525-552, for a discussion of the assumptions underlying this problem and the consequences of rejecting any one of them.

¹⁷ An earlier version of this paper was presented in the form of comments on Edward Wierenga, “Trinity and Polytheism,” The Kenneth Konyndyk Memorial Lecture, Society of Christian Philosophers, Central Division Meeting, American Philosophical Association, April 2002. I am grateful to the members of the audience on that occasion, and especially Dale Tuggy and Wierenga himself, for helpful comments and discussion. I am also grateful to Michael Bergmann, Susan Brower-Toland, William Hasker, and Michael Rea for detailed written comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.