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CONSTITUTION AND THE TRINITY: THE BROWER-REA PROPOSAL

William Hasker

Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea have proposed a model for the Trinity using a particular understanding of the relation of material constitution. I examine this model in detail and conclude that it cannot succeed. I then suggest, but do not fully develop, a model of the Trinity using an alternative notion of constitution.

In a series of articles Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea have proposed a novel solution to the problem of the divine three-in-oneness. I will discuss this proposal in the light of its most recent expression, Rea's article "The Trinity" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, supplemented by references to an earlier article by both Brower and Rea, "Material Constitution and the Trinity."¹ Rea's exposition of his preferred model for the Trinity is remarkably concise, due no doubt to space limitations. (In the course of his article he also discusses a number of other models.) But it is also quite complex, involving no less than three difficult and controversial metaphysical notions. Rea begins by setting out the problem for Trinitarian theology for which his model provides the solution. He then proffers relative identity Trinitarianism as the solution to that problem. Finding that the relative identity solution still leaves us with unresolved mystery, he turns to the problem of material constitution for further insight. But material constitution, according to Rea, is best understood in terms of the Aristotelian notion of "sameness in number without identity." We will need to follow these developments in some detail.

Rea begins by setting out the "three central tenets" of the doctrine of the Trinity:

(T1) There is exactly one God, the Father almighty.

(T2) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical.

(T3) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are consubstantial. (Rea, p. 405)

¹Michael C. Rea, "The Trinity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 403–429, referenced in the text with 'Rea' and page numbers; and Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, "Material Constitution and the Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 22.1 (January 2005), pp. 57–76, referenced in the text with 'Brower and Rea' and page numbers. References to earlier articles by Brower and by Rea are provided in both sources.



He then presents an argument purporting to show that these tenets generate a contradiction. According to Rea, the key assumption of that argument is

- (P1) Necessarily, if x and y are not identical then x and y are not numerically the same substance.

But (P1) can be rejected if we embrace the doctrine of relative identity, as formulated in the following principle:

- (RI1) States of affairs of the following sort are possible: x is an F , y is an F , x is a G , y is a G , x is the same F as y , but x is not the same G as y . (Rea, p. 417)²

Rea notes, however, that (RI1) by itself creates a problem for the understanding of statements about sameness. We can't, given (RI1), interpret sameness statements in terms of identity, but if not we need some other way to understand such statements, which (RI1) does not supply. In order to meet this need, Rea turns to the notion of constitution. He imagines that a contractor has fashioned a stone so that it is at once a supporting pillar for a building and a statue. (No doubt expressing the sentiment that the person depicted in the statue was a pillar of the institution housed in the building!) We have, then, both a statue and a pillar. But it would be strange to say that the contractor has made two material objects that are simply located in exactly the same spot at the same time—though Rea acknowledges that some philosophers do in fact say just that. Still, the pillar and the statue are not identical, as is shown by the fact that it would be possible to destroy the statue (e.g., by chipping away all the distinctive features that make the statue recognizable as such) without thereby destroying the pillar. Rea concludes, "Thus, what we want to say is that the statue and the pillar are *the same material object*, even though they are *not identical*. If we do say this, we are committing ourselves to (RI1). But we can make (RI1) intelligible by adding that all it means to say that two things are the same material object at a time is that those two things share all the same physical matter at that time" (Rea, p. 418).

In thus appealing to the notion of constitution, Rea has in mind a particular solution of the problem of material constitution.³ For further elucidation

²While Rea embraces (RI1), he rejects another principle that is often included in relative identity theories, namely

- (RI2) Either absolute (classical) identity does not exist, or statements of the form ' $x = y$ ' are to be analyzed in terms of statements of the form ' x is the same F as y ' rather than the other way around. (Rea, p. 417)

³Interestingly, Rea's exposition does not include the word 'constitution.' On his view, however, whenever two objects are each composed at a time by all of the same parts, they mutually constitute one another. The point of Rea's solution is that it denies the *identity* of objects that constitute each other (thus resolving the "problem of material constitution," which arises when identity is asserted), but avoids recognizing co-located material objects, which Rea (along with many others) regards as extremely counter-intuitive. (See Michael Rea, "The Problem of Material Constitution," *Philosophical Review* 104 (1995), pp. 525–552.)

on this point we turn to the earlier article on the Trinity jointly authored by Rea and Jeffrey Brower. According to Brower and Rea, the problem of material constitution arises because we have strong intuitions that support

- (MC) In the region occupied by a bronze statue, there is a statue and there is a lump of bronze; the lump is not identical with the statue (the statue but not the lump would be destroyed if the lump were melted down and recast in the shape of a disc); but only one material object fills that region. (Brower and Rea, p. 62)

If we are to honor this intuition, we need to make sense of the idea that the statue and the lump are one material object—that is, they are “one in number”—yet not identical. For help with this they turn to Aristotle’s doctrine of “accidental unities.” Aristotle’s ontology includes entities some have termed “kooky”; an example of such an entity is seated-Socrates. They write, “Seated-Socrates is an ‘accidental unity’—a unified thing that exists only by virtue of the instantiation of an accidental (non-essential) property (like seatedness) by a substance (like Socrates). . . . Accidental sameness, according to Aristotle, is just the relation that obtains between an accidental unity and its parent substance” (Brower and Rea, p. 60). Seated-Socrates and Socrates *simpliciter* are not the same in all respects—the latter, but not the former, sometimes stands or walks—but they nevertheless count as one object; it would be absurd to suppose that Socrates creates a whole new object just by sitting down.

Brower and Rea acknowledge that we might well be reluctant to admit objects such as seated-Socrates into our ontology. But, they add,

[W]e (fans of common sense) believe in many things relevantly like seated-Socrates. That is, we believe in things that are very plausibly characterized as hylomorphic compounds whose matter is a *familiar material object* and whose form is an accidental property. For example, we believe in fists and hands, bronze statues and lumps of bronze, cats and heaps of cat tissue, and so on. . . . This last point is important because the things we have listed as being relevantly like accidental unities and their parent substances are precisely the sorts of things belief in which gives rise to the problem of material constitution. . . . Socrates and seated-Socrates are, as [Aristotle] would put it, *one in number* but not *one in being*. They are distinct, but they are to be counted as one material object. (Brower and Rea, p. 61)

And this, they claim, provides a solution to the problem of material constitution, a solution that can be applied to the statue and the pillar. So we can say that “the statue and the pillar are numerically the same substance, even though they . . . would not share the same form, or nature. They would be numerically the same substance, one material object, but different form-matter compounds. They would be the same without being identical” (Rea, p. 419).

To amplify this further, note that each of the statue and the pillar is a form-matter compound; in each case the same underlying matter is configured by a different form.

This gives us two compounds, a statue and a pillar. Each is *a* substance. Thus, the statue and the pillar are emphatically *not* mere aspects of a common substance. . . . Furthermore, each is distinct from the other. But they are, nevertheless, the *same* substance. . . . You might think that if there is just one substance, then we ought to be able to ask whether *it*—the one substance—is essentially a mere statue or a mere pillar (or perhaps essentially a statue-pillar). But this thought is incorrect. On the present view, terms such as ‘it’ and ‘the one substance’ are ambiguous: they might refer to the statue, or they might refer to the pillar. For again, statue and pillar are distinct, though not distinct *substances*. . . . On the view I am defending, if *x* and *y* share the same matter in common, and *x* is a primary substance and *y* is a primary substance, then *x* and *y* are the *same* primary substance, despite being different matter-form compounds. (Rea, p. 419)

With all this in place, we can proceed to the application to Trinitarian doctrine:

In the case of the divine persons, we have three properties—*being the Father, being the Son, and being the Spirit*. . . all had by something that plays the role of matter. (It can’t *really* be matter, since God is immaterial. Suppose, then, that it is the *divine substance*, whatever that is, that plays the role of matter). Each divine person is *a* substance; thus, they are not mere aspects of a common substance. Furthermore, each is distinct from the other. . . . But they are nevertheless the *same* substance. . . . Since Father, Son, and Holy Spirit count, on this view, as numerically the same substance *despite their distinctness*, [(P1)] is false, and the problem of the Trinity is solved. (Rea, p. 419f.)⁴

But what exactly is the “divine substance” which on this view plays the role of matter in the doctrine of the Trinity? The answer is that it is the divine nature, but Rea declines to take a position concerning what exactly a nature is, except that it must allow the divine Persons to be “concrete particular non-properties” (Rea, p. 420).

So much for exposition; the task remaining for us is assessment. As we’ve seen, the solution to the problem of the Trinity is found in relative identity, which is then explained in terms of constitution, which in turn is explained by the Aristotelian notion of sameness in number without identity. In view of this, we had best begin our evaluation by looking at the latter notion.

At this point, however, I wish to suggest that Brower and Rea’s view of the constitution relation may be less closely connected with Aristotle’s ideas than they imply. Look again at their list of “Aristotle-like” examples: “fists and hands, bronze statues and lumps of bronze, cats and heaps of cat tissue.” Of these three, I submit that only fists and hands are relevantly similar to Socrates and seated-Socrates. And on the other hand, fists and hands are not the sort of examples that are normally used in setting out the problem of material constitution. *That* problem is typically illustrated

⁴Keeping in mind the context, I think we should attribute to Rea only the claim that *the particular problem with which he began his essay* has been solved. The claim that *all* of the problems involved in the doctrine of the Trinity are thereby resolved would be absurd, and it would be uncharitable to interpret Rea as making such a claim.

by examples similar to the other two mentioned here—bronze statues and lumps of bronze, cats and heaps of cat tissue. The difference between these two sorts of cases is that a fist is simply a hand characterized by the accidental property, *being clenched*, just as seated-Socrates is simply Socrates himself, characterized by the accidental property, *being seated*. But it is extremely implausible that “being a statue” and, more importantly, “being a cat” are mere accidental properties, instantiated respectively by a lump of bronze or a heap of cat tissue. When a cat is run over by a car, something of significance is destroyed; it’s not just a matter of a certain substance (namely, the heap of cat tissue) losing an accidental property. It’s for this reason that many of us find ourselves with problematic intuitions such as are expressed in Brower and Rea’s (MC) quoted above. I myself have no such intuitions in the case of hands and fists, and I suspect that many readers will agree with me about this. If this is correct, then Aristotle’s accidental unities are not relevantly similar to the cases that are paradigmatic for the problem of material constitution.

This, however, is a relatively minor point; the more important question is whether the Brower-Rea notion of constitution, however derived, does provide an illuminating solution to the problem of the divine trinity in unity. Unfortunately, I don’t believe this is the case. To see why not, let us look at Rea’s answer to the suggestion that “if there is just one substance, then we ought to be able to ask whether *it*—the one substance—is essentially a mere statue or a mere pillar (or perhaps essentially a statue-pillar).” He responds by saying: “On the present view, terms such as ‘it’ and ‘the one substance’ are ambiguous: they might refer to the statue, or they might refer to the pillar.” Surely, however, this is unsatisfactory as applied to Trinitarian doctrine. It will hardly do to be told that Father, Son, and Spirit are the “same substance” in that the expression ‘the one divine substance’ is ambiguous and can be used to refer to any one of the three! If it is the fact that there is only one divine substance that guarantees monotheism, it is not acceptable that there are three different, but equally good, candidates for that one substance. What is needed is that there should be *one thing only* to which ‘the divine substance’ refers, not that the expression can be used, ambiguously, to refer to any of three different things. But the remark about ambiguity is not an accidental misstatement; it is forced by the logic of the position. There is, we are told, only one substance. *What is this one substance?* It can’t be (merely) a statue, because if it were the substance would be destroyed if the features of the statue were obliterated. It can’t be (merely) a pillar, because if it were nothing would be destroyed by defacing the statue. It can’t be both at once; if it were, then in the situation described it would both be destroyed and not be destroyed. So it’s unavoidable that ‘the one substance’ is ambiguous. But such ambiguity is a poor foundation for Trinitarian doctrine.

This point can be brought out even more clearly by considering a different version of the problem of the Trinity. Recall Rea’s initial formulation of the central tenets of Trinitarian doctrine:

(T1) There is exactly one God, the Father almighty.

(T2) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical.

(T3) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are consubstantial. (Rea, p. 405)

(T1) apparently amounts to:

(T1') For some x , x is God, and $x =$ the Father, and for all y , if y is God $y = x$

(T2) clearly entails

(T2') the Father \neq the Son

from which it follows that

(T4) the Son is not God,

a heretical conclusion that apparently follows directly from two of Rea's three "central tenets," without any assistance from (P1). Rea might want to reply to this by claiming that 'God' as used here is ambiguous. It would then be true after all that "the Son is God," but 'God' has a different meaning here than it does in (T1'). Adding subscripts to disambiguate, we have both

(T1*) the Father is God_F

(T4*) the Son is God_S

and the conjunction of these is consistent with

(T2') the Father \neq the Son.

But the conjunction of (T1*), (T4*), and (T2') entails

(T₅) God_F \neq God_S

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that we have here a straightforward affirmation of two Gods—in other words, polytheism.

It might possibly be objected that I am begging the question. Brower and Rea offer an account according to which the pillar and the statue, even though they are distinct from each other, are numerically the *same* material object—and Father, Son, and Spirit, each of whom is "a God" and distinct from each of the others, nevertheless are the *same* God. They acknowledge that their account is incompatible with the standard definitions of number-concepts in terms of identity, such as, "There is exactly one $F =_{\text{def}} \exists x (Fx \ \& \ (y) (Fy \text{ iff } y = x))$." Their response is that these definitions are wrong; number concepts should instead be defined in terms of numerical sameness, of which identity is one species (see Brower and Rea, 62–63). This is a problematic maneuver for several reasons. First, the standard definitions of the number concepts have seemed extremely plausible and intuitive to a great many philosophers over a considerable period of time. To replace these definitions would seem to require more justification than is provided by the desire to support a particular solution to

the admittedly puzzling problem of material constitution. But second, it arouses one's suspicions if a person, challenged by the accusation that he has "too many" of something, responds by re-defining the number concepts so that the excess number is reduced. (Suppose a man accused of bigamy were to explain that, while he admittedly is married to each of two women, he has devised a new method of counting such that the two women "count as" one and the same wife!) But finally, it is precisely the application of these concepts to the doctrine of the Trinity that causes the greatest concern. Probably no one cares greatly (possibly excepting a few logicians) whether the statue and the pillar count as one object or as two. But for the Trinity what is at stake is monotheism itself, and that is no small matter. In the classical formulation of the doctrine, the Persons are three but monotheism is guaranteed by the fact that the divine nature or substance is one. Just for this reason, explanations that "divide the substance" are unacceptable. But that is what the Brower-Rea proposal does; it is precisely such expressions as 'the divine substance,' or indeed 'God,' that are rendered ambiguous by their proposal, as I have pointed out in the preceding paragraphs. In order to disambiguate, we can employ subscripts or some other form of notation. But once we have done this, we have *three distinct items* each of which is said to be "*the divine substance*" or "*the one and only God.*" It is then, I submit, too late to resolve the problem by proposing a revision of the number-concepts such that the three individuals "count as" one.

Our problem, then, is how to avoid making such terms as 'the divine substance' and 'God' ambiguous, as they are on the Brower-Rea view. What we need in order to avoid this, I suggest, is a different account of the relation that obtains between, on the one hand, the statue and the parcel of matter that constitutes it, and on the other hand between the Father and the "one and only God." It can't be identity, because we then should have both "the statue = the parcel of matter" and "the pillar = the parcel of matter," from which immediately follows the false proposition, "the statue = the pillar." And the same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the relation between each of the Trinitarian Persons and the divine nature or substance. If we can clarify the relation in this way, we will no longer need to hold that 'the one divine substance' is ambiguous.

I will now suggest (tentatively) that a somewhat different way of understanding the notion of constitution can indeed be of use here, though at best it will leave a great deal of work remaining to be done.⁵ Let's begin by considering the constitution relation as asymmetrical, rather than symmetrical as it is for Rea.⁶ We will say, then, that the lump of marble

⁵It is important to realize that the foregoing critique of the Brower-Rea proposal does not depend for its cogency on the success of the alternative suggested here. That alternative may prove helpful in supplying a solution for the problem of the Trinity, or it may not; in either case, the critique given above stands or falls on its own merits.

⁶Rea acknowledges that the relation is more commonly taken to be asymmetrical (see "The Problem of Material Constitution," p. 527 n. 5). My own approach to the constitution

constitutes both the pillar and the statue, but not vice versa, nor do the statue and pillar constitute each other. Do we now have to say that the pillar and the statue are *two material objects*, located at the same place at the same time? Many have taken this to be unacceptable, but I do not see that it need be so. If we keep in mind that the two objects are constituted by exactly the same parcel of physical stuff, we obviate otherwise awkward questions such as, “If each of the statue and the pillar weighs 600 pounds, shouldn’t their combined weight be 1200 pounds?” However, there may be an alternative. Recall Rea’s proposal that “all it means to say that two things are the same material object at a time is that those two things share all the same physical matter at that time.” From this it is but a small step further to stipulate that ‘material object’ designates simply the physical stuff—roughly, a continuous parcel of matter in the solid state, causally bound together.⁷ It will then follow that there is but a single material object, the lump of marble, which constitutes both the statue and the pillar. We can also say that each of the statue and the pillar *is* a material object—but the ‘is’ here will be the ‘is’ of constitution and not the ‘is’ of identity. What is important to keep in mind is that, as Brower and Rea rightly assert, “every solution of the problem of material constitution is counterintuitive” (Brower and Rea, p. 62). Common sense just does not have a good grip on the constitution relation, nor on many other topics related to modality.⁸

If this much is granted, then we have a parallel for (RI1), stated in terms of the idea of constitution:

- (C1) States of affairs of the following sort are possible: *x is constituted by an F, y is constituted by an F, x is a G, y is a G, x is constituted by the same F as y, but x is not the same G as y.*

Applied to the pillar-statue, this makes perfectly good sense: each of the pillar and the statue is at present constituted by the same material object (the lump of marble), and the pillar is not identical with the statue. (For ‘G’ in the formula read, “constituted object.”) Furthermore, (C1) has none of the paradoxical flavor that hovers around (RI1) itself. It also dispenses altogether with the notion of relative identity, which must be counted as a gain in view of the checkered history of the latter notion. To be sure, the idea of constitution is also contested, but its fortunes seem on the whole

relation is influenced by Lynne Rudder Baker, (see her *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007]), but I do not follow her analysis in every respect.

⁷A chessboard with a set of chessmen deployed upon the squares does not count as a single material object, because board and pieces are not (tightly enough) causally bound together. But a bronze casting of chessboard-with-chessmen, cast in a single piece, would be a single material object. (It’s evident that causal binding admits of degrees, and what sort of binding is required will depend on context. In some contexts, a well-defined cloud may well count as a single material object.)

⁸I believe Brower and Rea’s intuition (MC) actually comes from two disparate sources. Common sense tells us that there is only one material object, but it is modal logic that leads us to say that the statue is distinct from the pillar. If this is correct, it is not altogether surprising if the two sources turn out to be in conflict.

more favorable than those of relative identity. And Rea has bought into constitution in any case, so for him, at least, dispensing with relative identity should be pure gain.

In the light of all this it seems plausible that the notion of constitution, understood somewhat differently than Brower and Rea understand it, can play an important role in explicating the doctrine of the Trinity. Each of the Persons, we may say, is *constituted by* the divine nature but is not *identical with* that nature. And in virtue of the fact that each of the Persons is constituted by the divine nature, each Person *is God* (though not, to be sure, *is a God*, an assertion which has consistently been avoided by the Trinitarian tradition). Much work, however, remains to be done. We certainly do need an account of the divine nature or essence, which plays the role of “constituting object” in the Trinity, as well as a clearer account of what the constitution relation amounts to in this instance.⁹ (In Lynne Baker’s terminology, what are the “circumstances” under which the divine essence constitutes the Son, rather than the Father or the Spirit?) In addition to all this, more must surely be said in answer to the “three what?” question. So far the most we have is that they are three “concrete particular non-properties,” but this is clearly insufficient. So we have not by any means “solved the problem of the Trinity,” but perhaps a start has been made.¹⁰

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⁹In his extremely interesting comment on Brower and Rea’s article (“Does the Problem of Material Constitution Illuminate the Doctrine of the Trinity?” *Faith and Philosophy* 22.1 [January 2005], pp. 77–86), William Craig presses this point. Craig doubts that the analogy between the divine essence and the matter of a form-matter compound can be made sufficiently intelligible. He quotes (on p. 80) an explanation given by Rea in personal correspondence:

All we mean to commit ourselves to is the idea that maybe the Persons are like a hylomorphic structure: there’s something (we call it ‘the divine essence’ . . . but you could call it something else if you like) that plays the role of commonly shared matter, and for each Person, something else that plays the role of form.

Surely Craig is right in saying that “This explanation fails to allay one’s misgivings.” I strongly recommend Craig’s discussion to the reader’s consideration; I will not, in general, undertake to explain how his criticisms relate to those offered here.

¹⁰My thanks to William Craig, and to the editor and two anonymous referees, for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea, not only for their comments but for generously permitting me to quote from private correspondence.