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# Dancers, Rugby Players, and Trinitarian Persons

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# AND TRINITARIAN PERSONS

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Brian Leftow has replied to the objections I raised against his trinitarian views in "A Leftovian Trinity?." I explain why I don't find his replies persuasive, and add some additional points based on his recent response.

In my discussion of Brian Leftow's doctrine of the Trinity,[1] I raised two main objections. First, I argued that the view as he presents it has the heretical consequence that each of the three trinitarian Persons is identical with each of the other two. I admitted, however, that this could be remedied without major alterations to his view, and I suggested a way in which this might be done. My second objection was that even if the view is emended so that the Trinitarian Persons are not identical, it leaves us with a "modalist flavor" and falls short of making them distinct *persons*,[2] as they need to be for us to have a view that is scripturally and theologically satisfying. Brian, not surprisingly, disagrees with both criticisms.[3]

### Jane and the Time Machine

Our initial disagreement is focused on his "chorus line" analogy, and on the argument:

1a. the leftmost Rockette = Jane

2a. the rightmost Rockette = Jane

3a. Jane = Jane. So,

4a. the leftmost Rockette = the rightmost Rockette

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[1]"A Leftovian Trinity?," *Faith and Philosophy* 26:2 (April 2009), 154–166. Let me say that I meant no harm in dubbing Brian's view "Leftovian trinitarianism," and I am disappointed that he finds the adjective "surreally ugly." His own label for his view, "Latin trinitarianism," implies that the view is equivalent to the view of such classical theologians as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, a claim I am not prepared to grant. In view of this, the title selected seemed a reasonable alternative.

[2]I use 'Person' to designate the trinitarian Three without commitment as to their nature; 'person' is used to indicate something at least closely analogous to our ordinary concept of a person.

[3]See Brian Leftow, "Time Travel and the Trinity," this volume (*Faith and Philosophy* 29:3 [2012]).

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About this Leftow states, "The argument appears sound, but doesn't shorten the chorus line" (307).[4] Our question, then, is whether there is any legitimate way to interpret these statements so that, given the time travel story, they all come out as being true. Let me begin by stipulating, as I did in my article, that I am considering only interpretations of the argument according to which "=" stands for strict identity. This means that whatever is true of the entity on the left side of the identity sign is also true of the entity on the right side, and vice versa. From this it follows immediately that, in order for (1a) and (2a) to be true, the Rockettes must exist throughout Jane's life. (It's as though we said, "The 44th President of the United States lived in Indonesia." U. S. Presidents don't live in Indonesia, they reside in Washington, D.C. But having fixed the reference of "44th President" to Barack Obama, we can refer to him as such throughout his life, even though he was not then President.) If on the other hand we think of the Rockettes as existing only briefly, while Jane is playing those particular roles in the dance, then (1a) and (2a) are both false. (Actually, this is the effect of the emendation proposed in my article: by falsifying the premises, we render the argument unsound and therefore harmless.)

If, however, (1a) and (2a) are both true, then (4a) will follow, and it must be true that everything true of the leftmost Rockette is also true of the rightmost Rockette, and vice versa.[5] But this, I claim, is just plainly false. Suppose, when we are watching the performance, you suddenly exclaim to me, "Look! The rightmost Rockette just lost her wig!" I look at the indicated dancer, and see nothing amiss; in fact, it was the leftmost Rockette whose wig fell off. Most certainly, you have misled me; and it is equally certain that something true of the leftmost Rockette is *not* true of the rightmost, namely that her wig fell off during the performance. So (4a) is false, and if it is false so are (1a) and (2a). Leftow, on the contrary, wants us to accept that it *is* true that the rightmost Rockette lost her wig, even though it is also true that the rightmost Rockette still has her wig firmly in place right where it should be. But how sensible is that?

Part of what is at stake here is a point about our practical use of language. We need to be able to generate true descriptions of public events (such as dance performances) *without* knowing all about the personal backgrounds, etc., of the participants. Some of the dancers may be identical triplets, others may be space aliens in disguise—and some may have come through Leftow's Wells-o-matic. All this should make no difference to the truth of an empirical description that might be given by a spectator at the occasion. (Note that you and I, as we watch the performance, may

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[4]Page numbers in the text refer to Brian Leftow, "A Latin Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 21:3 (July 2004), 304–333.

[5]A point of clarification: I need not *deny* that, as Leftow claims, (1a)–(3a) entail

    4a*. the substance who is the leftmost Rockette = the substance who is the rightmost Rockette (316).

Perhaps they do; that is not my concern. What interests me is the fact that they undoubtedly *do* entail (4a) itself.

have no clue that Jane is appearing on stage in both positions.) A language in which this is impossible—for instance, a language such that, in order to use it, we need to know the time travel histories of the persons being described—would not be workable for us.

Brian, however, wants us to use language in a way that does take the dancers' time travel histories into account, and to interpret (1a)–(4a) accordingly. He takes the descriptions, 'leftmost Rockette' and 'rightmost Rockette' as temporally rigid, which means that they pick out Jane at all times of her life. (As I pointed out above, this follows from the fact that "=" expresses strict identity.) It follows, he says, that "all we can infer from (4a) are claims that apply to Jane equally in every episode of her life." Now, part of what Leftow says here is correct: (4a) will indeed be true of Jane throughout her life, even though there are many episodes in which she is not dancing at either end of the chorus line. Note, however, that (contrary to what Leftow has claimed) we *can* infer from (4a) that she was dancing at those locations *at the time when the reference of the descriptions was fixed*—which is to say, precisely during the dance performance at which she time traveled.[6] But it simply *is not true* that there was only one dancer in the chorus line on that occasion—unless, to be sure, we adopt Leftow's peculiar way of talking according to which we can't count the dancers without knowing their time travel histories. We can see how things have gone wrong when Leftow writes, "reading 'the leftmost Rockette' rigidly, Jane is the leftmost Rockette just in case she ever dances in the leftmost spot, and so too for the rightmost." That is a mistake. In order to be "the leftmost Rockette" (read rigidly), Jane must satisfy that description *on the occasion when the reference was fixed*. If she wasn't leftmost on *that* occasion, she isn't "*the* (note the implication of uniqueness) leftmost Rockette," even if she does occupy that spot on other occasions. This mistake leads to a fallacious inference: Since (4a) would have no implications for the length of the chorus line if Jane danced leftmost on one date and rightmost on another, "its being true with the descriptions read rigidly is not relevant to the length of any other chorus line Jane ever danced in—including one in which she time travels and is the sole dancer in an extended line." Here Leftow misses the importance of the fact that the reference of "leftmost Rockette" and "rightmost Rockette" were fixed *during* the time travel incident, so it is precisely what was going on during that incident that we must consider in evaluating (4a). And judged by that incident, as I've already argued, (4a) just is not true. (Here's another thought: Suppose Leftow was right, and there was just one Rockette. Then would a member of the audience who learned the true story be entitled to a refund of his ticket price, because he got to see only one dancer instead of the twenty or so that normally perform?)

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[6]One hopes, by the way, that she was paid handsomely for her performance; she must have been exhausted after going through the routine repeatedly in a very short space of time!

According to Leftow, I don't say how (1a) or (2a) manage to be false. But that's wrong; I explain this quite clearly. They are false because each Rockette is not identical with Jane *simpliciter*, but with something else; my suggestion was "Jane-during-the-interval-$t_n$-to-$t_{n+m}$." Or it may be that each Rockette is identical with a temporal part of Jane—and there may be still other possibilities. (As a presentist who believes time travel to be impossible—there *are no* times other than the present that we could go to—I don't propose to expend too much effort in figuring out the best ontology for time travel stories!)

Leftow says several times that I'm not granting him his time travel story, as I said I would. Not so. I'm assuming that everything happens as he says; what we disagree about is the right way to describe what has happened. I think that describing the time travel stories (both the story of Jane and my rugby example) in the way he recommends runs counter to our normal ways of using language to describe what is happening in the world. Anyone viewing the Rockettes' performance would naturally, and correctly, say that there are *many* dancers on the stage, not just one. And in general, the meaning of our words is fixed by usage; if we insist, Humpty-Dumpty-like, on using words in ways that defy ordinary usage, we breed only confusion. Each dancer can truly say, "I am Jane." Yet we are apparently confronted with many different "Jane-shaped objects," each occupying a different region of space; these objects patently are not identical with each other, and if they aren't they can't be identical with Jane *simpliciter.*

Leftow, however, wants us to give up our ordinary ways of describing what we see on stage, and adopt a way tailored to his example, so that there is only one dancer on the stage. We are bound to respond by asking, "Then *what is it* that there are many of?" He has not, in his original article, given a satisfactory answer to this question.[7] He complains that I am insisting on an answer "in the category of substance." All I am insisting on is that the answer to our question should be something that is able to *dance*, something that segments or episodes can't do. Interestingly, the same problem arises in Leftow's redescription of my rugby example. According to him, what there are "too many of" on the rugby field are *roles*—but roles don't make tackles, put the ball in at the scrum, or score tries; only players can do those things. According to Leftow, the number of players on the field is correct, so it's hard to see how the mere presence of additional roles should create a problem. Of course, no referee is going to be impressed by this reasoning; referees *do* know how to count players!

Moved perhaps by some such considerations, Leftow admits that "it does seem that as we watch the chorus lines, we see many things kicking, not just many kicks. There aren't many Janes. There *are* Jane earlier, Jane later, and Jane still later." So far so good; Leftow here is moving in

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[7]There is, however, an interesting remark early in his discussion: "If we give the name 'Rockette' to what we see many of, it lets the one Jane be (or be present in) many Rockettes" (308). This is, in my view, an excellent suggestion, but if we were to accept it we would have to admit that (4a) is false, which Leftow refuses to do.

the direction of my own suggestion, that each Rockette is "Jane-during-the-interval-$t_n$-to-$t_{n+m}$" (of course, with different values for "n" for each Rockette). But he hasn't moved far enough in that direction, for he immediately goes on to say, "Jane earlier is just Jane, diachronically identical with Jane later." If Jane earlier is identical with Jane later, we get the same old result: there is just one kicker, and we still have no answer to the question as to what there are many of in the chorus line. In the end, Leftow in effect admits that his way of describing the situation is inadequate: if time travel became common, we would need a "conceptual reform" in order to describe the situation appropriately. So maybe Brian and I agree about that; it's just that we have different ideas about what shape the needed conceptual reform might take.[8]

### Application to the Trinity

But what does all this have to do with the Trinity? As he says, "I took up (1a)–(4a) to set up discussion of

1. the Father = God
2. the Son = God
3. God = God, so
4. the Father = the Son."

In his reply to me, Leftow makes two surprising claims about this argument, claims which seem inconsistent with things said in the original article. First of all, he implies that in the different versions of the arguments he discussed, he never departed from strict, Leibnizian identity. But that is not true. He does discuss interpretations according to which the descriptions are read non-rigidly—that is, so that "the leftmost Rockette" does not refer except during the time when Jane is playing that role, and "the leftmost Rockette = Jane" is true only during that same period (see, e.g., 317). But in that case the leftmost Rockette *cannot* be strictly identical with Jane, because all manner of things are true of Jane that are not true of the leftmost Rockette. But secondly, and more importantly, he implies that I was misreading him by interpreting him as asserting that the argument (1)–(4), with "=" interpreted as strict identity, is sound.[9] I am truly mystified by this. It is indeed the case, as he says, that "I gave reasons to consider (1)–(4) both invalid and unsound." Quite so; he did give reasons to consider *some of the arguments* that might be expressed by (1)–(4) as invalid and unsound.[10]

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[8]It shouldn't surprise us if time travel should force revisions in our ontology. Time travel makes sense only given a four-dimensionalist view of time, and four-dimensionalism itself is often thought to require an unfamiliar ontology. Humans and other continuing objects, for example, are often viewed as 4D spacetime "worms."

[9]"I gave reasons to consider (1)–(4) both invalid and unsound. *Hasker seems to think* that these do not apply to (1)–(4) as involving ordinary strict identity" (emphasis added).

[10]Personally, I find it confusing and unhelpful that Leftow first states a formal argument that is apparently clear and unambiguous, then later explains that this argument can be understood in a considerable variety of different ways, some of them both valid and sound

But he also wrote "If God as the Persons is relevantly like Jane as the Rockettes, then just as (1a)–(4a) did not shorten the chorus line, (1)–(4) do not collapse the Trinity" (316). He also said of this argument that it is "sound but irrelevant" (316). *This claim is never repudiated.* And it is this "sound but irrelevant" version of the argument on which I am focusing my criticism. If Leftow is prepared to admit that (1)–(4) is unsound, and that (1) and (2) are false, I wish he had said this clearly in his original article; that would have saved me (and, I suspect, some other readers as well) a great deal of perplexity.

In fact, I don't think the argument (1)–(4) is at all ambiguous (again, interpreting '=' as strict identity). (4) states clearly that the Father, the First Person of the Holy Trinity, is identical with the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. And that conclusion is heretical by any orthodox Christian standard. If by the formulas employed in (1)–(4) Leftow did not mean to express the propositions those formulas would normally be taken to express, but some other propositions instead, he ought to have said so clearly and thus avoided obfuscation.[11]

He does, however, make an intriguing point in his subsequent explanation of why the argument (under another interpretation) is unsound. He writes, "On my account, God's life runs in three streams. In one stream, (1) is so. In another, (2) is so. In no stream are both so. So in no stream of God's life [is] (1)–(4) sound" (319). Presumably this means that if someone were to ask the Father, "Are you identical with God?" the answer would be Yes, while if the Father were asked, "Is the Son identical with God?" the answer would be No. The Son, on the other hand, would give the opposite answers to these questions, and the Spirit's answers would be still different. And *this* is supposed to be consonant with Trinitarian orthodoxy?

### About the Persons

In one sense the disagreements noted to this point are, while fascinating, comparatively minor. I have conceded that Leftow's view of the Trinity need not be formally heretical; it's just that I think some tinkering is needed

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while others are neither. My view is that, so far as possible, ambiguities should be identified and resolved *before* we reach the stage of a formal argument presented in the symbolism of logic. The other procedure does, to be sure, leave the author with more room to maneuver, but it also makes it very difficult for a reader to be sure what is being said.

[11]Here is one possibility for a different "reading" of the formulas: Just as he wants to say that

"the real force of (4a) is

> 4a*. the substance who is the leftmost Rockette = the substance who is the rightmost Rockette" (316),

he may want to say that the real force of (4) is

> 4*.  the substance who is the Father = the substance who is the Son.

That substance will then be said to be simply God, so (4) in effect merely says that God = God, which is harmless. But this won't work. Whether or not (1)–(3) entail (4*), they most certainly do entail (4) itself, which states the heretical conclusion that the Father is identical with the Son.

in order to avoid this, and he doesn't.[12] Our bottom-line disagreement, however, concerns the adequacy of his view even when freed from the imputation of heresy. His key idea is that in the Trinity we have God, a single person, living simultaneously three different "life-streams." Here, interestingly, much of his response to me amounts to a counter-attack. He criticizes what he takes to be my own view of the Trinity, based on an extremely abbreviated statement of the view at the end of an article mostly about other matters.[13] Now this comment is not devoted to either the exposition or the defense of my own view, so I will say only this much: Anyone whose idea of my view of the Trinity is primarily informed by Leftow's comments, both here and in his response to that other article,[14] is likely to form a distorted and inaccurate conception of that view. I would therefore counsel the reader to be very cautious in drawing conclusions about my view of the Trinity from what Leftow says about it, unless the conclusions are confirmed from my own writings on the subject.[15]

Having completed his counter-attack, however, Leftow does address my complaints concerning his doctrine. He does not dispute my assertion that on his view we have, during the Incarnation, God-as-Son praying to himself, namely to God-as-Father. He argues that this situation "should not seem odd to us if we can grant the coherence of (some instances of) a particular form of science fiction." Now I never said the view was logically incoherent. Oddity, on the other hand, may be largely in the mind of the beholder, but I suspect many readers will join me in finding Leftow's view odd at this point. I never suggested, however, that on Leftow's view the trinitarian Persons would be *selfish* because their love for one another amounts, in the end, to self-love. Proper self-love is an important virtue; one who lacks it probably can't get very far in loving others in the right way. ("You shall love your neighbor *as yourself.*") Still, many of us will feel that self-love by itself, unaccompanied by a comparable love for some other person or persons, is somewhat lacking. If Leftow doesn't agree, I must simply leave the matter to the reader to decide.

Leftow does seem to recognize the oddity of having Jesus on the cross cry out, in effect, "Why have I-as-Father forsaken myself-as-Son?" His explanation amounts to the idea that Jesus during his incarnation may not have been all that clear about his relationship with God the Father. "It

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[12]My suggestion is that he should say the Father is identical, not to God *simpliciter*, but to "God-living-the-Father-life-stream."

[13]"Objections to Social Trinitarianism," *Religious Studies* 46 (2010), 421–439.

[14]Brian Leftow, "Two Trinities: Reply to Hasker," *Religious Studies* 46 (2010), 441–447.

[15]Besides the articles cited above, there are "Has a Trinitarian God Deceived Us?" in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Michael Rea and Thomas McCall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38–51; "Constitution and the Trinity: The Brower-Rea Proposal," *Faith and Philosophy* 27:3 (July 2010), 321–328; "Deception and the Trinity: A Rejoinder to Tuggy," *Religious Studies* 47:1 (March 2011), 117–120; and "How to Think About the Trinity," in *Christian Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Colin Ruloff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming 2012). The last essay contains a brief overall account of my views concerning the Trinity.

should not seem odd to us that someone would feel that he had forsaken himself if he was not aware that it was he himself who (he felt) was doing the forsaking." I find these interpretations to be biblically and theologically disappointing and inadequate; readers will have to make up their own minds.

*Exegetical Postscript*

In my paper I had the temerity to suggest that Leftow might be guilty of reading into Aquinas a view he did not hold. Leftow wrote, "If the Father's deity is God's this is because the Father *just is* God: which last is what Thomas wants to say" (305). Now he gives us his evidence for attributing this view to Aquinas, and it consists of a saying also quoted in his earlier article. Thomas wrote, "But God begotten receives numerically the same nature God begetting has" (305). Leftow writes, "'God begetting' is one of Aquinas's terms for the Father. God begetting is God, doing something. . . . God generating is God, who does something. This is the sense in which for Aquinas, the Father just is God—and so too Son and Spirit."

I acknowledge that this quotation does provide grounds for the statement I questioned, *provided that* we assume Thomas held a doctrine of the Trinity very similar to Leftow's. Then there is one person, God, who, playing the role of the Father, does something—namely, generates the Son, another of the roles played by God. So each Person "just is" God, playing a different role in each case.[16]

But the quotation, though it *can* be read in this fashion, *need not* be so read. On another view, "God begetting" is just another term for God the Father, and "God begotten" just another term for God the Son, but without any implication that "God" is a *single* person who is playing these different roles. So the question of what Thomas "meant to say" may be inseparable from the overall question as to the nature of his Trinitarian doctrine. And that is something that can't be addressed in this concluding exegetical note.[17]

Leftow's interpretation of Aquinas does, however, suggest an additional line of thought concerning his own doctrine. "God begetting is God, doing something." This leads us to ask, what else does God do? So let us address to Leftow the following question: Did God suffer and die on the cross? ("God" here refers to *God*, the one and only person who is God, not

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[16]But if this is correct, it gives us yet another reason to reject both "God = the Father" and "God = the Son." The Father presumably has essentially the properties of begetting, and of being unbegotten. The Son has essentially the property of being begotten, as well as the property of not begetting anyone. And the Spirit has essentially the property of proceeding, and of neither begetting nor being begotten. But God cannot have all these properties essentially, since several of them are contraries of each other. It follows that God is distinct from each of Father, Son, and Spirit—not identical with each of them, as (1) and (2) assert.

[17]According to medieval scholar Richard Cross, Leftow's "version of Trinitarianism is itself novel" ("Latin Trinitarianism: Some Conceptual and Historical Considerations," in McCall and Rea, *Essays on the Trinity*, 201–213; quotation from 213).

to any of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as such.) Leftow's view entails that the answer to the question whether God suffered and died is an unqualified Yes. Now let us ask, Did God send his Son, a person distinct from himself, to suffer and die on the cross? Here the answer must be an unqualified No, for two distinct reasons: First, the divine Son is not the Son *of God*, but rather the Son *of the Father*, which is a different matter entirely. But second, the Son is *not* another *person* than God, although he is another Person than the Father.[18] Rather, the Son is the *same person* as God; he is, in Leftow's words, "God doing something," namely God experiencing the Son-life-stream. We have, then, the view that it was the one person who is God, and not any other person, who suffered and died on the cross. Now, this sort of view was not unknown in the ancient Church; the Fathers referred to it as "patripassianism"—or, to use the even more apropos Greek term, "theopaschitism."[19] The view was, of course, regarded as a heresy. I am certain Leftow does not believe his view commits this heresy, but I will leave it to him to explain why not.

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[18]Nor is the Son a distinct trinitarian Person from God. God is not a Person; rather he "is" all three Persons.

[19]See Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91–100.