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SIMPLE TRINITARIANISM AND FEATURE-PLACING SENTENCES

Shieva Kleinschmidt

Some Trinitarians, such as Thomas Aquinas, wish to claim that God is mereologically simple; that is, God has no parts distinct from Himself. In this paper, I present Simple Trinitarianism, a view that takes God to be simple but, diverging from Aquinas, does not identify the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with anything in our ontology. Nonetheless, Simple Trinitarians would like Trinitarian sentences to be true; thus, they must give a non-standard semantics for those sentences. I will focus on one possible semantics a Simple Trinitarian may give: taking Trinitarian claims to be translatable into feature-placing sentences, which posit property instantiation without requiring commitment to any objects that instantiate those properties.

“The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. However there are not three Gods, but one God.”¹ Trinitarians believe that there are three distinct divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of these is God and yet, exactly one God exists. But this appears to involve a contradiction: it seems the Trinitarian wants to claim three, distinct entities are each God, and yet only one entity is God.²

There have been a wide variety of responses to this puzzle. Some philosophers take non-standard approaches to the identity relation,³ or posit some kind of sameness between the Persons and God that is not strict identity.⁴ Many (though not all) of the remaining responses fall into one of the following two groups. According to “One-Self” accounts,⁵ God has one center of consciousness, and plays distinct roles or has different aspects. The common charge against this kind of account is that it involves con-

¹Athanasian Creed.

²As Dan Howard-Snyder points out, this puzzle has two readings: we could take “God” to be a count-noun (synonymous with “a god”), or as a name (Howard-Snyder, “Trinity”). I will generally treat “God” as a name, using “a God” to indicate when I wish to use it as a count-noun. But please substitute the count-noun reading as you prefer.

³See Martinich, “Identity and Trinity,” Cain, “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” and Kleinschmidt, “Many-One Identity” for a sample. I will set aside such responses in this paper.

⁴See van Inwagen, “And Yet They Are Not Three Gods,” and Brower and Rea, “Material Constitution and the Trinity,” for example. I will also set aside responses like these in this paper.

⁵I am borrowing Dale Tuggy’s terminology and division here. See Tuggy, “Trinity.”



flating the Persons, or requires they are not divine. In contrast, according to Social Trinitarian accounts, there are three centers of consciousness. There are definitely three distinct Persons but, it is charged, either the Persons are not each God or there are multiple Gods. In this paper I will present Simple Trinitarianism, which attempts to find middle ground between One-Self Views and Social Trinitarianism. Some Trinitarians, such as Thomas Aquinas,⁶ wish to claim that God is mereologically simple; that is, God has no parts distinct from Himself.⁷ Simple Trinitarianism follows Aquinas in claiming that God is mereologically simple, and incorporates resources used in metaphysical debates about ontology to produce the right results for claims about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Unlike with Aquinas's view, Simple Trinitarianism does not attempt to find a place for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our ontology (thus, they avoid multiplying gods, conflating Persons, or identifying the Persons with minor entities such as modes). The Simple Trinitarian uses semantics to explain how our ordinary sentences about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are true.

A quick note on the aims of this paper. I will present what I take to be a new and interesting view of the Trinity. However, my goal is not to convince anyone to actually endorse this view: it is quite extreme, and the motivation for endorsing it is somewhat idiosyncratic. Instead, my central aim is to highlight the extent to which linguistics may be of use to us in addressing the puzzle of the Trinity. It is widely assumed that Trinitarian sentences are significantly ontologically restrictive. I hope to show that with an unusual semantics, we can give slightly less obvious (but often independently motivated) interpretations of these sentences which give us more ontological options than we expected.

I will proceed as follows. In §1, I will briefly present One-Self Views and Social Trinitarianism. I will then present a process we might use to develop theories (and which helps us better to compare them). Using this framework, I will present Simple Trinitarianism and show how it relates to One-Self Views and Social Trinitarianism. In §2, I will describe one option for a semantics that the Simple Trinitarian may give to produce the right results for our ordinary language statements about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I will not suggest that the Simple Trinitarian should endorse this semantics (rather than another that would produce similar results); instead, I intend to merely show that the Simple Trinitarian has the option of using this semantics to cash out his or her view. In §3, I will

⁶*Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.1–26, and *Summa Theologiae* I.27–43. See Tuggy, “History of Trinitarian Doctrines” for more discussion of this view. It should be emphasized that Simple Trinitarians follow Aquinas in thinking God is *mereologically* simple. There may be other kinds of simplicity, and in particular, there may be simplicity with respect to properties exemplified. The Simple Trinitarian will not agree that God is simple in this way: God is predicatively complex, instantiating a wide variety of properties. This is exactly the sort of complexity in virtue of which Simple Trinitarianism bears some similarity to Social Trinitarianism.

⁷For a recent defense of the simplicity of God, see Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity.”

discuss some questions about and (rather significant) objections to Simple Trinitarianism, including the question of how Simple Trinitarianism relates to Brian Leftow's version of Latin Trinitarianism, whether the Simple Trinitarian can say that God is a Person, and whether this view is *really* Trinitarian.

1. Simple Trinitarianism Introduced

Before presenting Simple Trinitarianism, I will briefly describe the two sorts of view it is intended to contrast with. I will not be surveying all views of the Trinity, or even all varieties of One-Self or Social Trinitarian views. And I will not be evaluating these views. Instead, I will simply give a brief look at a few examples of these views, in preparation for showing how Simple Trinitarianism relates to them.⁸

1.1. One-Self Accounts and Social Trinitarian Accounts

One-Self theorists tend to present God as one Person who plays three distinct roles, or has three distinct aspects. There are various ways to endorse such a view. For instance, we might identify each of the members of the Trinity with modes, or events, or the roles that God plays, or different aspects of God. (This will allow us to avoid saying that God is identical with each of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.) One may interpret Aquinas's view of the Trinity this way. One may also read psychological models of the Trinity, such as that endorsed by St. Augustine, in this way: Aquinas says that we can find "images" of the Trinity in trinities in the human mind, with analogies to triplets such as memory, understanding, and will⁹ (though these analogies are taken to be very rough guides¹⁰). Alternatively, Karl Barth¹¹ and Karl Rahner¹² have presented views on which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are strictly identical to one another and to God. On this view, God stands in a wide variety of relations to Himself, such as begetting Himself, loving Himself, and so on. The Trinity is not a trinity of Persons (for those are each identical to God), but rather a trinity of modes of being, or roles that God plays. Regardless of whether we choose to identify the members of the Trinity with God or with other entities such as modes (or even with fusions of God and modes, events, properties, etc.), according to One-Self Views there is just one divine Person, though that Person may have many different ways of relating to His creation.¹³

⁸For a quite comprehensive overview of One-Self and Social Trinitarian views, see Tuggy, "Trinity." For an in-depth discussion of five recent, prominent views of the Trinity, see Howard-Snyder, "Trinity."

⁹Augustine, *The Trinity*, 374–382.

¹⁰Augustine, *The Trinity*, 428. For more discussion on this, see Tuggy, "History of Trinitarian Doctrines."

¹¹Barth, *Church Dogmatics*.

¹²Rahner, *The Trinity*.

¹³For more on this, see Tuggy, "Trinity."

Social Trinitarians tend to posit three distinct, divine centers of consciousness, each of which is a Person. Richard Swinburne¹⁴ claims that each of the divine Persons can be said to be a God in the sense of possessing the divine attributes. When we say that there is one God, we mean that there is one divine community, but strictly speaking, God is actually a collection of three divine Persons rather than a singular entity. There is not merely one divine substance, and there are multiple bearers of divine attributes rather than just one. Moreland and Craig¹⁵ offer a picture of the Trinity in which they claim that God is a single substance with three centers of consciousness or Persons as parts.¹⁶ The Persons have many of the divine attributes, but no Person (identified with a center of consciousness) is strictly identical to God. Again, "God" refers to a trinity of Persons (though the Persons share a single substance).

1.2. Theory Building

To explain the way in which Simple Trinitarianism attempts to find a middle ground between One-Self Views and Social Trinitarianism, it will help to first describe one way in which we might develop a theory of the Trinity. To do so, I will make a quick detour: I will describe a general method of developing a theory and then will give an example from a debate in ontology. This example will not only help in explaining this method of theory-building, it will also provide background for some of the discussion in §2.1 of this paper. I will then return to show how this method applies in developing a view of the Trinity, and in particular, I will use it to explain the similarities and differences between Simple Trinitarianism and One-Self and Social Trinitarian views.

In developing a view of the world, we may take the following three steps. (1) Present a rough picture of what the world looks like. That is, without making technical claims about it, roughly describe how you think things are. (2) Give a technical theory that describes the picture you have presented; it should tell you which entities are present in the picture you presented, where identity relations are instantiated, and which other (perhaps controversial) properties and relations each of the entities and groups of entities instantiate. (3) Give a semantics that connects our ordinary language sentences to the picture and the theory of it that you have described. Show how our ordinary sentences come out true, or explain the revisionary nature of your theory if you believe they come out false.

To give an example of going through these steps, consider the following views:

Monism: Exactly one material object exists.

¹⁴Swinburne, *The Christian God*.

¹⁵Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*.

¹⁶Some dispute the extent to which this picture is monotheistic, as it involves positing three distinct, divine Persons. See Howard-Snyder, "Trinity Monotheism." Worries like this may be part of the Simple Trinitarian's motivation for seeking an alternative view.

Ontological Nihilism: No material objects exist.

Compositional Nihilism: No composite objects exist. That is, every object is mereologically simple: no object has any parts that are distinct from it.

The Standard View: More than one object exists, and some objects are composite.

There are multiple ways to endorse each of these views. For instance, suppose we complete step (1) by presenting a picture on which there *seems* to be just one, exceptionally tiny thing. This picture naturally suggests both Monism and Compositional Nihilism: in completing step (2), both can say that there is exactly one thing and, since that is the case, no composition occurs.¹⁷ However, this is a highly revisionary picture; according to it, the world is not at all how it appears to us to be. Monists and Compositional Nihilists needn't endorse this kind of Revisionary Monism or Revisionary Compositional Nihilism. They could instead (and often do) complete step (1) by presenting a picture of the world that looks just like the picture presented by the proponent of the Standard View. On this picture, the world looks just as we tend to think it does; it is full, not empty. The difference between the views then becomes apparent with the completion of step (2). When we ask for theories describing the picture, identifying which bits of the world correspond to objects in their ontology, we will receive very different answers. The Monist will indicate exactly one thing, the *whole* thing all together, as the only object. This will be an extended simple: it fills an extended region, but it has no parts within that region that are distinct from it. Thus, the cosmos fails not only to have a left and right half, it also fails to have tiny particle-sized parts, person-parts, planet-parts, and so on. There is just one, large, mereologically simple object, which instantiates some quite complicated properties. Ontological Nihilists will say there are *no* objects; they will try to explain what we think we see in some other way, perhaps via appeal to matter or to spacetime with interesting properties. When we ask Compositional Nihilists to describe this same picture, they will give a very different answer from Monists and Ontological Nihilists. They will indicate (perhaps infinitely) many things, but none of those things will share parts, and none of them will make up other things. And when the proponents of the Standard View give their theory, they may posit the same objects Compositional Nihilists do, but they will also posit fusions of many of those objects. Finally, our theorists will need to complete step (3) to tell us how our ordinary language sentences, such as "The hat is on the table," relate to the world. This is straightforward

¹⁷Still, an Ontological Nihilist can also endorse this picture, claiming that instead of any material *things* there is merely instead some material stuff (or something along those lines). And a proponent of the Standard View can endorse the picture, claiming that multiple entities are collocated (though this would be farther from a common sense interpretation of the picture than such a theorist may want to accept).

on the Standard View: we can simply claim that “the hat” and “the table” both refer to entities in our ontology, and the sentence is true if and only if one, *the hat*, stands in the proper relation to the other, *the table*. The proponents of the more revisionary metaphysical views have some choices: they can deny that our ordinary sentences are true, or they can give a slightly more complicated semantics for them. For instance, the Monist may wish to take “the hat” to refer to a way The One object is, and the sentence “the hat is on the table” will count as true if and only if that property stands in the right relation to another property had by The One. The Compositional Nihilist, on the other hand, may say that when we talk of hats we’re really talking of “simples arranged hat-wise,” and say that the sentence is true just in case some group of such atoms are collectively on top of some group of atoms arranged chairwise. In §2 I will discuss one of the semantic options for theorists who accept revisionary metaphysical views, in order to show how the Simple Trinitarian may use the same semantic resources (without endorsing the same metaphysics).

1.3. Simple Trinitarianism

We can use this theory-building process in generating views of the Trinity as well. Suppose (taking very literally the instruction to “present a picture of how things are”) we ask a Trinitarian to draw God, using stick-figures. One-Self and Social Trinitarian theorists will disagree about which sort of picture of the world to endorse. One-Self theorists, at least of the sort I have described above, may present us with a picture of one stick-figure person holding many hats, symbolizing one “self” that has multiple roles it plays. Or they may present us with a duck/rabbit-esque picture. Social Trinitarians, on the other hand, may present us with a picture of three stick-figures, symbolizing three “selves.” There will be some theorists whose pictures won’t fall neatly into either of these categories; for instance, Moreland and Craig’s picture may be of a single stick-figure with three heads. Brian Leftow, who uses a time-traveller as a model of the Trinity,¹⁸ would produce a picture that is technically of a single stick-figure that is thrice present. (This view will be further discussed in §3.2.) It is not important for our purposes here that *every* One-Self or Social Trinitarian view will produce one of the two pictures I’ve described, just that many of them will, and that there is a fundamental difference in how these theorists think the world is (even before we’ve gotten to technical questions about which entities are divine, which are identical to which others, and so on).

Once we have these pictures, we can move on to step (2): we can ask our Trinitarian to circle the bits of the picture that correspond to entities in their domain, to say which of these objects are identical to which others, and to then say which of these objects is God, which objects are divine, which are Persons, etc. With this second step, two views (corresponding

¹⁸See Leftow, “A Latin Trinity” and “Time Travel and the Trinity.”

to the two different pictures) will be multiplied into many. For instance, some One-Self theorists with the first, one-stick-figure picture, will circle the stick-figure and also each of the hats, and then will indicate that the stick-figure is God. But then there are some options: she may identify the stick-figure with each of the members of the Trinity, or she may identify each member with one of the hats, or she may identify each member of the Trinity with a hat/stick-figure combination, etc. And the Social Trinitarian who adopts the picture with three stick-figures has a choice between saying that each stick-figure represents a God, or that the collection of the three stick-figures corresponds to the only God.

Simple Trinitarianism, as I am conceiving of it, involves opting for the second picture of the world: if you ask a Simple Trinitarian to draw God, they will give you a picture of three stick-figures. The Simple Trinitarian, in giving a rough picture of what the world looks like, will agree with the Social Trinitarian about the apparent complexity of God. This is what helps them, for instance, avoid saying that when the Father loves the Son, this just amounts to an instance of self-love. The Simple Trinitarian can agree with the Social Trinitarian that when the Father loves the Son, what's happening is that one portion of reality stands in a particular relation to another portion of reality.¹⁹ However, the Simple Trinitarian will say that there are not *individual entities* corresponding to those different portions of reality. For step 2, when asked to circle the bits of the rough picture of God that correspond to entities in their domain, the Simple Trinitarian will draw only one circle, surrounding everything in their picture. The Simple Trinitarian may believe that there are other things that also exist, such as puppies and atoms and humans, but when it comes to God, there is exactly one entity. God will not have any distinct parts that make Him up. There will be no other candidates for divine entities, and certainly not multiple Gods. In this way, the Simple Trinitarian's view bears some resemblance to One-Self Views. Simple Trinitarianism, then, is intended to capture both the complexity posited by Social Trinitarianism and the unity posited by One-Self Views. Importantly, though, unlike both Social Trinitarians and One-Self theorists, the Simple Trinitarian will not identify any of the objects in their picture (or in their domain) with the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit: taking God to be simple, the Simple Trinitarian cannot identify any of the members of the Trinity with distinct parts of God. And the Simple Trinitarian resists identifying the members of the Trinity with things even partly disjoint from God, such as events or properties (even though some of those things are importantly related to God).

¹⁹Even if there are not distinct objects corresponding to the different portions of reality, the Simple Trinitarian can see a big difference between the Father loving the Son and the Father loving the Father. Consider the analogous case: suppose a Monist agrees with a Standard View Theorist about the rough picture of the world (i.e., how complex reality seems to be), though they disagree about how many objects there are. The Monist can still see a difference between a state of affairs of a father loving his daughter, and the father loving himself, even though there are not distinct *objects* corresponding to the father and daughter.

Still, this Trinitarian wants our ordinary statements about the members of the Trinity to come out true. Thus, this revisionary ontology will require an unusual semantics.

2. Feature-Placing Sentences

In this section we will look at one option for how one might endorse a semantics that allows our ordinary language statements about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to come out true, while those entities are not present in our ontology. We want to be able to truly say “The Father begot the Son,” “The Father and the Son are distinct,” “The Son is God,” and “There is exactly one God.” We want to also be able to maintain the falsity of “The Son begot the Father” and “There are three Gods.” And we should keep in mind that the following semantics is just one of many available options; it is presented here in order to show that there is a way to cash out Simple Trinitarianism, though this is not the only way to do so.

2.1. Ontological Nihilism and Lack of Reference

Sometimes, sentences truly describe how the world is without having referential subject terms. For instance, consider these ever-popular examples:

1. “The average American adult male has 2.3 children.”
2. “It is raining.”²⁰

In the first sentence, we are not talking about some entity, *the average American adult male*. And not only that, the noun-phrase “the average American adult male” does not refer to *anything* in our ontology; there is nothing in our ontology with exactly 2.3 children (thankfully!). Instead, the sentence has a logical structure that is quite unlike its surface structure. The sentence tells us that the number of children with American fathers divided by the number of adult American males is 2.3.²¹ Still, in spite of having a non-obvious logical structure, the sentence is literally true. It is not expressing a metaphor or an approximation or something merely pragmatically helpful or appropriate.

Similarly, in sentence (2), the subject-phrase “it” does not seem to refer to anything. When we assert the sentence, there is nothing of which we are attempting to say, “that is raining.”²² Instead, the sentence communicates the existence of an event of raining (or something along those lines) in some contextually salient location. Again, the logical form of the statement is unlike the surface structure of the statement; it is not merely of the form Fx where x is the referent of “it” and F is the property *is raining*. Further, unlike sentence (1), the truth-conditions for sentence (2) arguably do not commit us to the existence of any material objects. In this way, the

²⁰Among other places, these examples are discussed in Hawthorne and Cortens, “Towards Ontological Nihilism.”

²¹Hawthorne and Cortens, “Towards Ontological Nihilism,” 155.

²²Hawthorne and Cortens, “Towards Ontological Nihilism,” 146.

sentence may be said to be “ontologically innocent.” Following Strawson, I will call such sentences “feature-placing sentences.”²³

Recently, John Hawthorne and Andrew Cortens have examined how one might use such sentences as inspiration for a semantics that allows Ontological Nihilists, who believe there are no material objects, to nonetheless claim we are speaking truly when we say “The hat is on the table.” Hawthorne and Cortens’s idea is this. First, Ontological Nihilist can build a language that includes *only* feature-placing sentences. So, for instance, in describing what looks like a white pebble, we may use our language to produce sentences such as “it is pebbling,” “it is pebbling whitely,” “it is presently pebbling here.” Second, Ontological Nihilists can develop a translation scheme for translating all of our true sentences in ordinary language into this ontologically innocent Nihilist language. Third, Ontological Nihilists will claim that their innocent language more perspicuously depicts reality, and that when we utter a sentence of ordinary language such as “the hat is on the table,” the truth-conditions are exactly the truth-conditions of the corresponding sentence of our Nihilist language, “it is hatting directly above where it is tabling.”

One natural reaction to this semantics is this: though the subject-phrase “it” in the sentence “it is raining” does not refer to anything, the sentence does seem to be *about* something, namely, the world. The sentence says that the world has certain properties, such as *including an instance of rain*. That is: according to this response, feature-placing sentences are not quite as ontologically innocent as the Nihilist may have thought. Even when we think we’re merely talking about the existence of property instances, positing those commits us to the existence of something that instantiates those properties, such as *the world*. This reading of feature-placing sentences will produce a Monist semantics rather than an Ontological Nihilist semantics. The Nihilist could disagree with this take on feature-placing sentences, but I will note that I find this picture a more intuitively plausible interpretation of the sentences.

2.2. Application to the Trinity

Here is how we might apply Hawthorne and Cortens’s ideas to Simple Trinitarianism. The Simple Trinitarian wishes to describe the complex picture the Social Trinitarian accepts, but without being committed to the existence of the members of the Trinity. Thus, the Simple Trinitarian may offer a description of feature-placing language that can be used describe what God is like, and will then make general claims about how

²³Strawson, *Individuals*, further discussed in Quine, *The Pursuit of Truth*. It should be emphasized that Hawthorne and Cortens, “Towards Ontological Nihilism,” use this term more narrowly. They use it for sentences (such as, they argue, “it is raining”) that not only fail to commit us to the existence of any material objects, they fail to commit us to the existence of any material entities whatsoever (so, for instance, they also do not commit us to the existence of stuff, arguably a separate ontological category that is (typically) not picked out with count nouns).

our ordinary-language sentences about the members of the Trinity can be translated into feature-placing sentences.

Here are some general rules they may give to apply to sentences about members of the Trinity (and importantly, they may endorse this semantics for sentences including the noun-phrases “the Father,” “the Son,” and “the Holy Spirit” while rejecting them the corresponding rules for all other sentences). Note that for relational sentences, our theorist may opt to translate all relations into predicates.²⁴

- Any sentence with the surface form “ x is F ” corresponds to a feature-placing sentence of the form “it is x -ing F -ly.”
- Any sentence with the surface form “ xRy ” corresponds to a sentence of the form “it is x ing R - y -ly” or “it is x ing y -Ring-ly.”

For instance, “the table is taller than the ant” may be translated as “it is tabling taller-than-the-ant-ly,” and “the table squashed the ant” may be translated as “it tabled ant-squashingly.” In cases where we think the object of such a sentence also, strictly speaking, does not exist, we may further translate the sentence:

- Sentences of the form “it is x ing R - y -ly” or “it is x ing y -Ring-ly” may correspond to feature-placing sentences of the form “it is x ing R -its-ying-ly.”²⁵

Rules for universal and existential quantification translations can also be given. Finally, the Simple Trinitarian will note that (a) these rules may be taken to only apply in sentences about members of the Trinity, and (b) the term “God” will typically be treated as an ordinary referential term and will not require translation.

So, for instance, here are some things we would like to assert about members of the Trinity:

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

Here is how the Simple Trinitarian, utilizing a Hawthorne/Cortens semantics, might translate the above sentences:

²⁴Hawthorne and Cortens, in “Towards Ontological Nihilism,” do not discuss how to extend their theory to relational sentences, but for more on the alternatives available and difficulties facing such extensions, see Hawthorne and Sider, “Locations,” and Turner, “Ontological Nihilism.”

²⁵The details of such translations would also include information about when to add or substitute certain suffixes. For instance, the change between “ x loves y ” and its translation “it is x ing loving-of-its-ying-ly.”

8. It Fathered uncreatedly.
9. It Fathered world-creatingly. (Or perhaps: it Fathered creating-of-the-world-ly.)
10. It Fathered Its-Sonning-begottenly. (Or perhaps: It Fathered begotting-of-Its-Sonning-ly.)
11. It Holy-Spirited From-Its-Fathering-and-Its-Sonning-Proceedingly. (Or perhaps: it Holy-Spirited Proceedingly from Its Fathering and Its Sonning.)
12. It Holy-Spirited exactly once.

With a translation scheme from ordinary language into less ontologically-committing language, the Simple Trinitarian is able to assert all of the ordinary claims of the Trinity but avoid many of the negative consequences faced by other theorists. And it is on the basis of this ability to avoid these negative consequences that the Simple Trinitarian will argue not just that a translation-scheme like this one exists, but that we should take the less ontologically-committing sentences to more perspicuously describe the world than statements expressed in ordinary language.

It's worth noting that the Simple Trinitarian is not as restricted as the Ontological Nihilist in her interpretation of Trinity-involving feature-placing sentences. The Ontological Nihilist needs to take such sentences to be ontologically innocent, but the Simple Trinitarian loses nothing if the truth of these sentences requires the existence of something. It is also not problematic if "it" in these sentences refers. All the Simple Trinitarian must avoid is commitment to any members of the Trinity, or to any distinct parts of God. Thus, the Simple Trinitarian is free to say that, just as "it is raining" tells us what the world is like, (8) tells us something about God. When asking what the sentence is about, the correct response is: it is about God. And, for the Simple Trinitarian's purposes, it is permissible to take "it" in each of (8)–(12) to refer to God. (It is God that has the property of Fathering uncreatedly, for instance.) Simple Trinitarians simply need that "The Father," "The Son," and "The Holy Spirit" in ordinary language sentences such as (8)–(12) do not refer. Thus, the Simple Trinitarian has more options than the Ontological Nihilist. But the semantics presented by Hawthorne and Cortens gives us a helpful guide for how a Simple Trinitarian semantics may go.

Interestingly, we may also wish to endorse Hawthorne and Cortens's view about existential claims in ordinary language. When discussing how the Ontological Nihilist should treat the claim "pebbles exist," they pointed out that one option is for the Ontological Nihilist to say that the sentence is literally true, but that its truth-conditions don't actually involve the existence of any material objects (instead, the sentence is translated

into the more perspicuous “it is pebbling at least once”).²⁶ Similarly, the Simple Trinitarian can endorse this sentence in ordinary language:

13. The Father exists.

The Simple Trinitarian does not actually have anything in his or her ontology corresponding to The Father, but (13) is true in virtue of having the same truth-conditions as:

14. It Fathers. (Or perhaps: Its Fathering exists.)

Again, importantly, the Simple Trinitarian does not take “The Father” to refer to Its Fathering or even just *Fathering*, just as the Ontological Nihilist will not identify pebbles with *pebbling*. If such identifications were made, we would be committed to a host of additional claims, such as: the Father is a property, and pebbles are properties. We do not want to make such commitments, and nothing forces us to do so.

One final note in my presentation of this semantics. It allows us to truly say the sentence “there are two pebbles in my shoe” without, strictly speaking, there actually being two material objects, pebbles, in our ontology, but such a semantics does not thereby let us use ordinary language to assert the existence of anything we choose. We cannot, for instance, truly say “there are a thousand pebbles in my shoe.” This is because the truth-conditions of the sentence, though they don’t actually require the presence of such objects in our ontology, are still tightly connected to the way the world is. The world does not instantiate the right properties to ground the truth of “there are a thousand pebbles in my shoe.” Similarly, though we can truly say “the Father created the world,” even if there is nothing in our ontology that is the referent of “the Father,” our semantics does not give us a free pass to then say “twelve Fathers created the world,” because God does not instantiate the properties required to ground the truth of that sentence.

2.3. Two Worries For This Semantics

I have two concerns about this use of feature-placing sentences for Simple Trinitarianism. The first is a worry about anaphoric predication, the second is a worry about counting. I believe that both worries can be addressed, but I wish to highlight that more work needs to be done here.

Consider the following sentence:

15. I am in the room, and so is this puppy, Chompy.

Sentence (15) includes an instance of *anaphoric predication*; the same predicate is applied to two noun-phrases (here, across two inflectional phrases). The sentence says the property *being in the room* applies to me, and that the same property also applies to Chompy. Sentences involving anaphoric

²⁶Hawthorne and Cortens, “Towards Ontological Nihilism,” 156.

predication may cause problems for our Simple Trinitarian's use of feature-placing semantics. Consider this sentence:

16. The Holy Spirit is in the room.

According to our feature-placing semantics, (16) corresponds to:

17. It is Holy-Spiriting in-the-roomly.

But now consider this sentence that seems to involve anaphoric predication:

18. The Holy Spirit is in the room, and so am I.

Suppose, for instance, that I assert (18) in an attempt to communicate my close proximity to the Holy Spirit. This seems like a reasonable, assertable sentence. And though there are some sentences that look like they have anaphoric structure but do not actually involve anaphoric predication, such as "the sky is blue, and so is her mood," this sentence doesn't strike us as involving any sort of ambiguity in the predicate.

Here's the problem: if we understand the truth of (16) as requiring merely the instantiation of a quite complicated property, *Holy-Spiriting-in-the-roomly*, then it does not seem that there is a property that the first conjunct of (18) predicates which can also be applied to me. And this seems to be the wrong result: if we can truly say the Holy Spirit can be present at all, it seems we should be able to truly say the Holy Spirit can be present in the same room with me.

There are two appealing options for responding to this. First, you might simply agree that any Trinitarian sentences involving anaphoric predication will be false. Far from being a problem, you might take this to be a good result. You may endorse the Aquinas's Doctrine of Analogical Predication,²⁷ according to which, roughly, we cannot share properties with God. When the Holy Spirit does something, it is done divinely, and in a way at best merely analogous to how I or any other nondivine entity can do it. We shouldn't expect to be able to share properties with the Persons, and the fact that this falls out of our semantics is a *good* feature of that semantics. There are two quick things to note about this response, though: (a) insofar as a feature-placing semantics for the Persons of the Trinity entails something like analogical predication for the Persons of the Trinity and non-divine entities, it will also entail that anaphoric predication fails for sentences about multiple members of the Trinity. That is, just as we cannot say "The Holy Spirit is in the room, and so is Shieva" and take that to involve a single property being picked out by a predicate applied both to "Shieva" and "the Holy Spirit," we cannot say that "The Holy Spirit is in the room, and so is the Son" and take that to involve a single property being picked out by a predicate applied to both "the Holy Spirit" and "the

²⁷See, for instance, Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* I. For an excellent recent discussion of this, see Bonevac, "Two Theories of Analogical Predication."

Son.” The second thing to note is that, because the Trinitarian feature-placing semantics allows for “God” to refer to an entity in our domain, the semantics does not block anaphoric sentences such as “God is in the room, and so am I,” and so the doctrine of analogical predication with respect to *God* does not follow as a result of our semantics, though the doctrine with respect to the Persons of the Trinity does.

Suppose, instead, that you think at least some sentences like (18) can be true. Some work will need to be done in showing how. One strategy is to claim that (16) does not simply require the instantiation of one quite complex property, but instead requires the instantiation of two properties: *Holy-Spiriting*, and *being in-the-room*. For this strategy to work, it will be important that the predicate *in-the-room* can apply to both individuals and properties. There may be other, better responses to this problem, but it seems that some solution will be available, though work will need to be done to show how it goes.

There is a second, much more serious worry about using feature-placing semantics for Simple Trinitarianism. The worry is that we will be able to truly assert that there are three gods. Here is why. Consider the sentence:

19. Maegan is a philosopher and Renee is a philosopher.

In feature-placing language, this will translate to:

20. It is Maeganing philosopher-ly and it is Reneeing philosopher-ly.

From this, we would like to be able to conclude:

21. It is philosopher-ing twice.

And this should correspond to the ordinary English sentence:

22. There are at least two philosophers.

Similarly, for this Trinitarian sentence:

23. The Father is a Person, and the Son is a Person.

The corresponding feature-placing sentence will be:

24. It is Fathering Person-ly, and it is Sonning Person-ly.

And we would like to conclude from this that:

25. It is Person-ing twice.

And this corresponds to the ordinary English sentence:

26. There are at least two Persons.

These are inferences we are glad to be able to make. But now consider the following sentence and its feature-placing translation:

27. The Father is a god, and the Son is a god.

28. It is Fathering god-ly and it is Sonning god-ly.

From this, we'd like to conclude:

29. It is god-ing twice.

And it looks like this will correspond to the ordinary English sentence:

30. There are at least two gods.

This is a big problem, especially because part of the Simple Trinitarian's motivation for their restricted ontology may well be an attempt to avoid multiple divine entities, in an effort to avoid multiple gods.

In order to avoid this result, it looks like Simple Trinitarians will have to attempt to block every one of these sorts of inferences. For instance, they may attempt to block the inference from (20) to (21), and (24) to (25). That is, for instance, they would block the inference from *its Sonning Person-ly* to *its Person-ing at least once*. They'll block the inference from a sentence merely involving a feature-placing predicate to a sentence containing count language. Alternatively, our theorists may attempt to block the reading of (21) as (22) or the understanding of (25) as (26); that is, they may agree that we can conclude sentences like "it is Person-ing twice," but deny that such a sentence corresponds to ordinary sentence "There are at least two Persons." I am inclined to think the first of these two responses is the most promising, and that attempting to block these count-involving inferences is, while costly, a much better option for the Simple Trinitarian than accepting that there's a true sense of "there are three gods." But a lot of work needs to be done here.

Finally, one last response is for the Simple Trinitarian to simply opt for an alternative semantics. There are many other options for how a Simple Trinitarian semantics could go, and some of them will not face these worries.²⁸ Still, this semantics gets many of the results we want, and there are things that can be said in response to the worries facing it.

3. Questions, Objections, and Replies

To conclude my presentation of Simple Trinitarianism, I will consider some questions and objections about the view. However, before jumping into describing its vices, let us take a moment to look once again at the view's virtues.

Simple Trinitarianism is intended to allow for both community and unity: it is intended to allow for the complexity of the Social Trinitarian picture of the community of Persons (a complexity captured in the Simple Trinitarian picture by a wide array of events and states of affairs), but to also put an emphasis on the unity of God by taking Him to be completely indivisible. The view avoids objections about dividing the substance, and it allows us to avoid any suggestion that there are multiple Gods; for the

²⁸For application of another semantics to Simple Trinitarianism, see Kleinschmidt, "Simple Trinitarianism and Empty Names." For another very relevant view, see Horgan and Potrč, "Blobjectivism."

Simple Trinitarian, there is only one entity that exemplifies the divine attributes. And Simple Trinitarianism also allows us to avoid conflating the Persons or identifying them with minor entities such as events or properties.²⁹ And it allows us to say almost everything we want to about the members of the Trinity (and we have multiple options for how we may take the semantic component of the view to go).

However, there are some significant worries about the view. I will begin with one matter of clarification, and then discuss two difficulties for the view.

3.1. How Does Simple Trinitarianism Relate To Leftow's Latin Trinitarianism?

Brian Leftow has presented a version of Latin Trinitarianism on which God is, in some sense, multiply *wholly present*. Leftow presents as a rough analogy a story about a time-travelling Rockette who comes to occupy every position in a chorus line made up entirely of her; there is exactly one Rockette on the stage, but there seem to be many, and they can differ in their properties.³⁰ Though we may deny that God is ever located in time or space, we can claim that there is some sense in which God, like the Rockette, can be multiply present without this involving a multiplication of objects.

There are some important ways in which Simple Trinitarianism and Leftow's Latin Trinitarianism are similar. The Simple Trinitarianism has the option of claiming that God is simple but is somehow multiply wholly present. Leftow's view gives us a nice way to explain how God can be complex while our number of entities remains restricted.

However, there are also some crucial differences between Simple Trinitarianism and Leftow's Latin Trinitarianism. For instance, Leftow's view does not commit him to the simplicity of God; unlike the Simple Trinitarian, Leftow is free to say that in the incarnation God had hands that broke bread and feet that were washed. An even more crucial difference between the views is that Leftow has a place in his ontology for the members of the Trinity. He does not deny the existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is one source of objections to Leftow's view: once we have the Persons in our ontology, we are pressed to deny their divinity, conflate them, or endorse the existence of multiple Gods. In the case of Leftow's view, worries have been raised that multilocation leads to conflation of the persons: the point of multilocation is that you have *one-and-the-same* entity at distinct regions. Saying that God is multilocalized, and that at one region God is the Son and at another He is the Holy Spirit, seems to require either region-relative identity or the strict identity of the Son with the Holy

²⁹Identifying the Persons with modes or events seems particularly worrying if you believe God does not have modes or events as parts. For then, not only are the Persons not identical to God, they are partly mereologically independent of God! They each include something that God does not. This may be a secondary objection, of course; the primary objection is likely to be that we simply don't want to claim that Jesus was an event or a property.

³⁰See Leftow, "A Latin Trinity."

Spirit.³¹ Simple Trinitarianism avoids this problem, though of course, with other costs.

3.2. Can a Simple Trinitarian Say God Is a Person?

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are excellent candidates for being Persons.³² For instance, they have complex mental states and seem to be morally responsible for their actions. However, the Simple Trinitarian cannot say that, strictly speaking, there is a Person who is identical with the Father (or if they do say this, they must also note that this is not the most perspicuous way to describe the world). If we cannot appeal to the members of the Trinity as divine Persons, can we say there are any divine Persons at all?

Of course, what the Simple Trinitarian will want to claim is that God is a divine Person. But if God is a simple entity consisting of what looks like a community of three Persons (though without there being any objects corresponding to those Persons), establishing that God has the right features for Personhood is non-trivial.

The Simple Trinitarian's response can come in two parts: first, they can try to establish that God has many of the requisite properties for personhood; and second, they can claim that God, having these properties, is the best candidate in the vicinity for being a person.

One difficulty for establishing that God has person-like properties is this: the Simple Trinitarian picture of God is just like the Social Trinitarian's. It involves positing three centers of consciousness (or something along those lines; and of course, the Simple Trinitarian will not agree that there are literally distinct objects that are centers of consciousness and which are parts of God). One may worry about how something with three centers of consciousness can be said to be a Person: how can it act, believe, and love? There are two options for response here. The first is to follow Trenton Merricks in thinking that it is not completely unheard-of for multiple centers of consciousness to be had by a single person.³³ Merricks has us consider a person with a "split brain," where the hemispheres of the brain have limited ability to communicate and so, it seems, there are multiple centers of consciousness. Merricks argues that when someone undergoes an operation that causes them to come to have a split brain,

³¹For more on this objection see Hasker, "A Leftovian Trinity?" and Leftow's reply, "Time Travel and the Trinity."

³²Of course, there is disagreement about how we should interpret the word "Person" in the context of the Trinity. For instance, David Brown claims that at the time the Athanasian Creed was written, "Person" meant simply something like *the bearer of a referent*, rather than a "self-reflective and self-determining center of consciousness" (Brown, "Trinity," 526). On this less demanding reading of "Person," it is easy for the Simple Trinitarian to claim the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Persons. However, it is common to take the members of the Trinity, or at least God, to be a Person in a stronger sense. It is that objection that I am hoping to address. For more on debates about use of the word "Person," see also Barth, *Church Dogmatics* and Rahner, *The Trinity*.

³³Merricks, "Split Brains and the Godhead."

there is exactly one person who emerges from the operation, namely, the same person who underwent it. I will not argue for or against this view here. It is simply worth noting that, if you agree with Merricks about split brain cases, but you are also motivated to claim that God is mereologically simple, you might opt for Simple Trinitarianism and find no problem with saying that God is a person with (something along the lines of) three centers of consciousness.

Consider now a Simple Trinitarian who does not agree with Merricks. They may still claim that their simple God is a person by giving an account inspired by Swinburne.³⁴ Their first step will be to argue that a group of divine entities itself can have the divine attributes. Just as we may claim that, when a group of three people each knows a fact, the group knows the fact, we may be able to claim that a group or team of three omniscient persons knows everything, in virtue of each of its members having this feature. (We can make similar claims for omnipotence and omnibenevolence.) Further, as Swinburne notes, there seem to be close connections between the states of the members of the Trinity; they jointly cause, jointly will, and necessarily co-exist. All of this can be appealed to in attempting to establish a unity that makes more plausible the claim that God itself has the properties of causing and willing. Second, it is very plausible that if something has the divine attributes, then some person does. But on the Simple Trinitarian picture, the only person in the vicinity is God. Unlike the Social Trinitarian, the Simple Trinitarian does not believe that God has any proper parts that are also divine. So, if there is to be a person who caused the world's existence, who knows everything, and who sometimes answers our prayers, this person must be God.

I am not satisfied with this response, however. To see why, consider a strange view: suppose someone believed that whenever two people got married, those people went out of existence and the fusion of those people was the only object left in the vicinity. Suppose one such married "couple" is named "Brangelina."³⁵ Our theorist might say: "Some person in the vicinity of Brangelina raises children, interacts with the press, and so on. But there is no person, *Brad* or *Angelina*. Instead, the only candidate in the vicinity for being a person is Brangelina. So, we should take Brangelina to be a person." This is clearly a terrible argument. The correct response to the argument is to either reject the strange view about what happens with marriage, or to deny that, given that view's truth, there is some person in the vicinity of Brangelina.

Likewise, I think that it may be better for the Simple Trinitarian to bite the bullet and agree that there are no divine People. The Simple Trini-

³⁴Swinburne, *The Christian God*.

³⁵It is my understanding that this term is used to refer to Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Note that if there is not a fusion of Pitt and Jolie, and if the name is taken to refer to a material object (rather than a collection, set, plurality, group, or other such entity), then this will be an example of an empty name that is often used in true sentences, and which, unlike fictional entities, is closely tied to how the world is.

tarian can still claim that God is Divine, but they will accept that there is not a single center of agency or of moral responsibility. Still, they will say, when speaking in ordinary language we can truly claim that The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are Divine Persons. And, they may also note, insofar as anyone ever becomes tempted to allow Social Trinitarians to think the Trinitarian community is itself a person, they should take the Simple Trinitarian God to be a person as well.

3.3. *How Can This Possibly Be Trinitarian?*

As we saw in §2.1 and §2.2, we are not guaranteed to be able to adequately capture all of the statements about the Trinity (such as the claim that “the Son is God”), and most crucially, even if we can have a true sense of the sentence “the Son exists,” there will also be a sense in which that sentence is either false or it fails to perspicuously describe reality. But if anything is central to Trinitarianism, it seems the existence of the members of the Trinity would be!

The Simple Trinitarian will reject this claim. They will say that what is essential to Trinitarianism is a certain picture of the world, on which God has a certain degree of complexity, and God relates to us and to the world in particular (and quite varied) ways. And Simple Trinitarianism does capture this picture. The additional claim, that there really are *objects* corresponding to what we call “the Father,” “the Son,” and “the Holy Spirit,” rather than just portions of reality with the right properties, is not a crucial component of Trinitarianism.

However, I believe that Simple Trinitarianism is revisionary enough that it is not a good option for everyone. For many theorists, there are easier alternatives for solving the problem of the Trinity. Simple Trinitarianism is presented here as a promising option for four kinds of theorist: (i) someone who already wishes to claim that God is mereologically simple but wishes to retain as much of Trinitarianism as they can, (ii) One-Self theorists who is wary of identifying the Persons with entities such as properties or events, (iii) Social Trinitarians who are worried that positing three bearers of the divine attributes commits them to the existence of three gods, and (iv) Trinitarians who already accept restrictive ontologies in other domains, such as those who accept Monism, Ontological Nihilism, or Compositional Nihilism (for such a theorist, if they wish to allow for our ordinary sentences about material objects to often be true, will already endorse a semantics that can help us in translating the claims about the Trinity). For theorists such as these, there is motivation for adopting this unusual view, and it is less revisionary than we would have suspected.³⁶

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