CAN A LATIN TRINITY BE SOCIAL? A RESPONSE TO SCOTT M. WILLIAMS

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Scott Williams's Latin Social model of the Trinity holds that the trinitarian persons have between them a single set of divine mental powers and a single set of divine mental acts. He claims, nevertheless, that on his view the persons are able to use indexical pronouns such as "I." This claim is examined and is found to be mistaken.

Scott Williams's Latin Social model of the Trinity has a number of impressive features.[1]

It is presented against a broad background of historical trinitarian thought, yet it employs some distinctively modern concepts in arriving at its own account of the Trinity. Williams criticizes standard social models of the Trinity and puts his own view forward as a Latin model, yet he also claims to fulfill the requirements for a social model. He recognizes the central difficulty for models of the Trinity that hold that the divine persons have only one set of divine mental powers between them, and attempts to resolve it.

Another distinctive feature is his choice of interlocutors for his presentation. Richard Swinburne, Brian Leftow, and I are far from being fully in accord in our trinitarian proposals; in fact, we have criticized one another on important points. But all of us, according to Williams, share a common flaw, which results from the assumption of a "modern notion of personhood." He quotes my statement, following Cornelius Plantinga, that the divine persons are "distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action . . . distinct centers of consciousness."[2] This notion of the persons is also held by Swinburne, but Leftow's view is somewhat different. For him, there is only one divine person in this sense; the trinitarian persons are three distinct, parallel life-strands of experience, whereby the one and only divine person (namely, God) lives his life. For all three of us, however,

[1]Williams, "Unity of Action."

[2]Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 24.

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each divine person performs his own cognitive and volitional acts, acts which are "incommunicable" in the sense that they are not and cannot be the acts of any other person.[3] And this means that each divine person has his own set of cognitive and volitional powers, which are likewise incommunicable. (Call this the "multi-power" view.) Williams holds that this is a mistake: on his view, all divine acts are communicable, and in fact are common to all three divine persons. Correspondingly, there is only one set of divine cognitive and volitional powers, grounded in the one concrete divine essence or substance which is common to the three persons.[4] (This is the "one-power" view.) It is this difference that, according to Williams, creates the difficulty that makes his opponents' views unsatisfactory. In what follows we first consider Williams's objection to the views of Swinburne, Leftow, and me; we then go on to examine his own view in detail.

In pursuing these topics I will not, in general, be discussing the various theological authorities Williams cites as support for various features of his view. I do, however, want to call attention to a distinction which may assist us in evaluating these appeals. This is the distinction between the content of a mental act, and the act itself. When millions of voters cast their votes in favor of a particular candidate, there is in a sense "one will" between them: they all will that N_____ should be elected. But of course, the mental acts by which they will this are as numerous as the voters themselves. To take an example that may be closer to the trinitarian case, when two humans are in love each wills the same thing: that each should love the other. But while the content of their willing may be the same, the acts are distinct: he wills "that *I* shall love *her*, and that *she* shall love *me*," and she wills "that *I* shall love *him*, and that *he* shall love *me*." The importance of this distinction becomes apparent when some authority asserts that the trinitarian persons have "one will" between them. Only when it is evident that what is being asserted is that there is a single *act* of will for all three persons, does the assertion count in favor of Williams's view of the Trinity.

Williams's objection to his opponents focuses on the "necessary agreement" (NA) that must obtain between the wills of the three divine persons.

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[3]Williams states, "A feature of this conception, as I understand it, is that a person is a person by being constituted (at least in part) by cognitive acts, or by being identified with a stream of intellectual and volitional acts" ("Unity of Action," 327). This is a mistake. It may be correct as applied to Leftow's view of the trinitarian persons, but it is incorrect as applied to Swinburne's and my own.

[4]There is a distinction made by Williams, or rather a related pair of distinctions, that I am unable to comprehend. Following Henry of Ghent, he distinguishes between active intellectual powers and passive intellectual powers. He explains the difference by saying, "Active intellectual power is that by which a person can produce and can use mental tokens," whereas "passive intellectual power is that by which a person can be united with a mental token and can be united with an individual use of a mental token." Unfortunately, I find this latter distinction as opaque as the former, so it does not help me to understand what is being said. I do not believe these distinctions are crucial to the other matters discussed in the present essay, but I am not certain about this.

This means that the wills of the persons cannot fail to agree on anything. If, as Williams proposes, there is between the persons only one faculty of volition and only one act of willing with regard to any matter, NA is easily seen to follow. If on the other hand each person has his own faculty of will and his own act of will with regard to some matter, it seems that there is a possibility of disagreement. Williams recognizes that Swinburne, Leftow, and I all affirm NA, but he holds that the explanations we give for NA's obtaining are inadequate.

The possibility of disagreement can arise only in certain situations. If one conceivable course of action is morally prohibited, that course will not be a live option for any divine person. And on the other hand, if one course of action, among those that would be morally permissible, is clearly rationally preferable to any other in the circumstances, once again the persons will automatically agree and there is no possibility of disagreement. But where there are "permissible alternatives," where no moral prohibition applies and none of the alternatives is rationally preferable, it would seem that there might be disagreement between the persons. (Swinburne's example concerns the direction in which the earth revolves around the sun.) Might it not be that the "initial preferences" of the persons might be different? Both Swinburne and I accept that this might occur, and we propose different ways in which the disagreements might be resolved so as to prevent an actual conflict of wills. Swinburne supposes that, in bringing about the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Father might designate "spheres of influence" in which each of the persons would decide the issue, if the initial preferences of the persons should differ. I, on the other hand, have suggested that in the event of differing preferences the persons, recognizing the undesirability of conflicting wills, would voluntarily come to a resolution that all would accept.

Williams states, "I find appeals to an agreed upon moral reason or rule for such cases to be theologically and philosophically unsatisfying."[5] The reason he states for this dissatisfaction is that such appeals "insufficiently secure NA."[6] Now it is true that, where human beings are concerned, any predictions which rely on the assumption that people will follow the dictates of reason and morality must fall well short of absolute certainty. But would this be true of divine persons? Consider again my proposal, noted above. Would divine persons, endowed with supreme wisdom and goodness, not recognize that it would be a very bad thing for them to oppose their wills to one another? And recognizing this, would they not find an acceptable way to resolve their different preferences?[7] The answers, it

[5]Williams, "Unity of Action," 322.

[6]Williams, "Unity of Action," 322.

[7]One referee finds this inadequate, because a trinitarian model "is supposed to give a specific way that the three persons subsist that necessitates their agreement," and my proposal fails to do this. I believe, however, that in this case the requirement is unreasonable. Human beings of good will, in a comparable situation, might find a number of different ways to resolve their initial disagreement: is it supposed that I ought to be able to discern

seems to me, are obvious—and if so, it is not the case that proposals such as Swinburne's and mine leave NA insufficiently secured.

It should also be noted that the multi-power view is not tied logically to the possibility of different preferences among the persons. Leftow does not accept this possibility, and I express considerable hesitation about the possibility, though in the end I do accept it. It could be that, in view of the fact that the powers of all the persons are grounded in the one concrete divine nature they all share, in view also of the interpenetration and complete mutual awareness of the persons implied by the doctrine of perichoresis, that even this minimal form of non-agreement between the persons is impossible. I have stated, "In the absence of further compelling arguments on either side, it seems to me that either answer to the question [about the possibility of different preferences] is consistent with the rest of what needs to be said concerning the Trinity."[8] If this is right, then Williams's argument based on NA cannot be conclusive against the views he is criticizing.[9]

Even if Williams has failed to refute the views of Swinburne, Leftow, and me, it still might be the case that he has presented an alternative that is superior to any of them. In view of this, we need to examine his own view carefully. A natural place to begin is with his conception of the divine persons. As we have seen, he rejects the modern conception of a person, stated by me, as "distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action . . . distinct centers of consciousness." His own definition is derived from Richard of St. Victor, as follows: a person is "an incommunicable existence of a rational nature."[10] In spite of the difference in style and wording, this definition has considerable extensional overlap with my definition. Both definitions will apply to human persons as well as to angels. The important difference, however, concerns the mental acts and mental powers of the persons. The modern conception requires that the acts should be "incommunicable," that is, that the mental acts belong essentially to the person who is their subject, and cannot be or become the acts of any other person. Williams's definition, however, leaves it open that these acts and powers are communicable. Furthermore, in the case of the divine persons this possibility is realized: on Williams's "one-power" model, there is just one set of mental powers, and all divine mental actions are common to all three persons. So persons as understood under the modern notion will

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which of these ways (as opposed to some divine process I know nothing about) the divine persons would use? In any case, if this suggestion is thought unsatisfactory, the problem can be avoided altogether by denying that initial disagreements are possible.

[8]Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 210.

[9]It could be that Williams is not claiming to have a conclusive objection, but is merely pointing out that his own view secures NA more economically, without the further assumptions utilized by Swinburne and me. Questions about economy, however, need to be addressed to the theories as a whole, not just to special features of each view. I believe some of the assumptions needed for Williams's own view (see below) are considerably more problematic than the assumptions invoked by Swinburne and me.

[10]Williams, "Unity of Action," 326.

qualify as persons under Williams's definition, but the converse is not necessarily the case. The divine persons are not persons in the modern sense.[11]

If we try to form some conception of what the inner life of God might be like on this conception, we run into difficulties. One might think that the persons are really superfluous: we could simply attribute the divine mental acts to the single divine substance (which would then constitute a person in its own right), and let the three persons go. But this will not do; each person is an "incommunicable existence *of an intellectual nature*," and the intellectual nature guarantees that the persons can have conscious experiences and be the subjects of mental acts of cognition and volition. And yet, there is only one consciousness and one set of mental powers and mental acts! The closest I am able to come to imagining this is to think of science-fiction scenarios in which an alien race (or perhaps humans in a "more evolved" state) exist in a "group mind," in which all thoughts, beliefs, and volitions are fully shared, and the individual organisms are important only as means for carrying out particular volitions. To be sure, many readers find these scenarios repellent rather than attractive. It is clear that on this view no divine person will be able, on his own, to originate any act of divine will.

This leads to some interesting thoughts concerning the Incarnation. In some very brief remarks on this topic Williams states, "on my view a consequence of the Incarnation is that God the Son has and uses created mental tokens in addition to divine mental tokens."[12] I suggest that this underplays the significance of the change made by the Son's becoming incarnate. Once incarnate, the Son has human volitions as well as divine volitions. These human volitions, however, are the volitions *only* of the Son, and *not* also of the Father and the Holy Spirit. But this means that *only* the Son now has the power to *originate volitions of his own*, without the other two divine persons simultaneously (and in the same act) willing the same thing. This power is one that Father and the Spirit can never possess, unless of course they also, at some point, become incarnate. And this means that the Incarnation can seem less a kenosis or humiliation, and

[11]It seems to me that there is a need for additional evidence to establish that Richard of St. Victor viewed divine mental powers in line with the one-power model. (Clearly, this does not follow merely from the fact that his definition does not specify that the acts and powers are incommunicable.) Lacking such evidence, there is reason to doubt that his is a one-power view. Consider in this regard his well-known explanation of why there are three divine persons: A perfectly loving person needs another person of equal worth to fully exercise the attribute of love, and two such persons who love each other will have their love fully perfected only in their mutual love for a third person. Here the Father's generation of the Son is seen as a *motivated, volitional act*, albeit one that is inevitable due to the superior excellence of a multi-person Godhead—not merely as the automatic operation of the non-personal divine nature. Furthermore, this act must be an act *only* of the Father; it cannot be an act also of the Son and the Holy Spirit, since the act is presupposed by their very existence. So the Father does have the power to perform acts of his own, not shared by the other two persons. And if so, it would seem to follow from the *homoousion* that the Son and the Spirit also have corresponding powers.

[12]Williams, "Unity of Action," 339.

more a *metaphysical augmentation or enhancement* of the Son. I believe one will have difficulty finding places in the classical literature on the Incarnation where the subject is viewed in this light.

Now however we must turn to what Williams recognizes as the most serious challenge to his view, the "argument from the essential indexical 'I'." Leftow states the problem succinctly:

> [D]id the whole Trinity will, "The Son shall become incarnate?" The Son could not learn from that that *he* would become incarnate unless he could also think to himself, in effect, "I am the Son, so *I* shall become incarnate."[13]

This thought, however, must be a thought of the Son alone, and not of the Father or the Holy Spirit. Williams cites me as claiming that only the Son willed that "I shall become incarnate."[14] Williams summarizes the implied argument as follows:

1. If the Son wills that *i* (where *i* shall stand for the proposition that I shall become incarnate) and the Father and the Holy Spirit do not will that *i*, then the divine persons have numerically distinct (and incommunicable) will powers.
2. The Son wills that *i* and the Father and the Holy Spirit do not will that *i.*
3. Therefore, the divine persons have numerically distinct (and incommunicable) will powers.[15]

The argument is evidently valid; Williams's project is to undermine the argument by falsifying the first premise. In order to do this, he must provide a way in which the Son alone can will that *i*, without the persons' having numerically distinct will powers. His way of doing this is both ingenious and quite complex.

The first major step is the introduction of *divine mental tokens.* Williams begins by establishing some points about tokens in general. In spoken communication, the creation of a token sentence by the speaker generally coincides with its use, and the token has only one occasion of use. This need not, however, be true of tokens in general. A simple example is a stop sign used by the flagger at a highway construction project. Each time the flagger holds the sign up, a separate command is issued: namely, that the vehicles then approaching should come to a stop. On another day, the flagger at a different construction project can use the same stop sign. And the workers at the factory that produced the sign issued no commands whatever in producing it.

This establishes that the same token can express multiple propositions (or in this case, commands) on different occasions of use. Williams, however, needs to have it that a single token can express multiple propositions on the same occasion. For this, he turns to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit.* In the opening scene of this classic, Bilbo is standing outside his front door

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[13]Leftow, "Anti Social Trinitarianism," 70.

[14]See Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 206–207.

[15]Williams, "Unity of Action," 337.

smoking his pipe, when along comes Gandalf. "Good morning!" says Bilbo, to which Gandalf tartly replies, "What do you mean? Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I wish it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that is a morning to be good on?" Bilbo answers, "All of them at once."

Now, I think one could reasonably doubt whether Bilbo really did express all of these propositions by his conventional greeting; some of them may simply be accepted after the fact as possible interpretations. But if we do accept the multiple meanings at face value, it is worth noticing that all of the different alternatives offered by Gandalf are possible only because Bilbo's greeting was extremely vague in what it expressed.

But why must we posit divine mental tokens in the first place? We humans do sometimes formulate mentally sentences of our language, in order to think our thoughts. But it is hardly evident that we must always do so.[16] And as Williams acknowledges, we could say that "divine persons affirm and will propositions without using a mental token of a sentence type."[17] His reason for rejecting this is that in this case we will have to accept that there are distinct cognitive and volitional powers for each divine person. In other words, the postulation of divine mental tokens is a cost of Williams's theory; it is not something that is evident in its own right.

Now, however, we need to see how the tokens enable us to solve the problem of essential indexicals. We begin with the simplest case, in which one divine person affirms of himself something that is true of all three—for example, "I am wise." When the Father affirms that "I am wise," this affirmation entails that the Father thinks the Father is wise, and similarly for the Son and the Holy Spirit. In general, any time a token of "I" is used, the referent of the token is the person using that token. So when the three persons use this token, different propositions are thereby expressed. (This parallels the situation with Bilbo, in which several propositions are expressed by the same use of a token.) In ordinary circumstances, when several persons use the same token to express different propositions, there is a distinct use of that token for each of the propositions expressed. But in the trinitarian case, where the persons have only one set of mental powers between them, there is only one use of the token "I am wise," a use which is common to all three persons. Nevertheless, "The divine persons are aware of different propositions if they use a mental token with the indexical 'I' in it."[18]

Things become more complex when the token expresses something that is true of only one divine person. If the Father says, "I am the Father," this use of that mental token expresses the proposition that the one speaking

[16]Consider the case of Helen Keller, who lived for a number of years when she did not even have the concept of a language. It is, I think, wholly incredible that during those years she did not think any propositions.

[17]Williams, "Unity of Action," 333.

[18]Williams, "Unity of Action," 330.

is, in fact, the Father. But of course, the Son cannot use the expression "I am the Father" to express the proposition that he, the Son, is the Father—obviously not, because he isn't the Father. To understand how all three persons can share in the one mental act of using that token, we need to take account of an ambiguity in the copula, "am." According to Williams,

> [W]hat the copula expresses is relative to the *agent* using the token. If the agent is the same person as the person mentioned in the predicate, then the copula expresses identity. If the agent is not the same person as the person mentioned in the predicate, then the copula expresses numerical sameness without identity.[19]

In view of this,

> If the Son uses the same mental token of "I am God the Father" . . . the Son affirms the proposition that the Son is essentially numerically the same divine nature as the Father without being identical to the Father.[20]

(Henceforth I shall refer to this as the NSWI [numerical sameness without identity] interpretation of the copula.) Once again, in view of the context-dependent reference of "I," as well as the multiple interpretations of the copula, we are able to have different true propositions expressed by each of the persons in virtue of a single use of one divine sentence-token. Williams states, "This way of analyzing mental tokens that include the indexical "I" and the ambiguous copula is a general theory for divine mental tokens."[21]

As we seek to evaluate the NSWI interpretation of the copula, the reader is asked to bear with me in a simple but admittedly far-fetched thought experiment. Suppose the Holy Spirit says to Peter, "I am God the Father, who sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." Sometime later Peter learns that it was in fact the Holy Spirit who spoke thus to him. Peter is troubled by this; he complains that he has been misled, perhaps even lied to. The Holy Spirit, however, explains that there was no intentional deceit; the problem was rather one of translation. The message given to Peter was first formulated in the divine language of thought. Peter, of course, does

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[19]Williams, "Unity of Action," 331. This concept of numerical sameness without identity is the same as Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea's ("Material Constitution and the Trinity") concept of "sameness in number without identity." An example they give: a hand is not strictly identical with a fist, but we "count them as one": we do not say that a man has two things at the end of his arm, a hand and a fist. And while a divine person is not strictly identical with the divine nature, the person and the nature together are "counted as one." I have reservations about the notion of numerical sameness without identity, but will not go into them here. For further discussion, see Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 131–137.

[20]Williams, "Unity of Action," 331. There is a potential mistake here which needs to be guarded against. If the Son is essentially numerically the same as, but not identical with, the divine nature, then the Father must also be essentially numerically the same as, but not identical with, the divine nature. It does not follow from this, however, that the Son is essentially numerically the same as, but not identical with, the Father. (Non-identity is not a transitive relation.) To be sure, the Son *is* non-identical with the Father, but this does not follow from the conjunction of the NSWI statements.

[21]Williams, "Unity of Action," 332.

not know this language, so the message was translated into Greek in order to be conveyed to him. The formulation given to Peter was the best available translation into Greek of the original message in the divine mental language. However, a problem arose with regard to the copula "am." In divine mentalese, that copula is ambiguous as between expressing identity and expressing the NSWI interpretation. The copula in Greek (as in other human languages) lacks this ambiguity, so the ambiguity was not conveyed to Peter. As a result, he misunderstood the message and mistakenly identified the speaker of the message as God the Father. (The correct interpretation of the message is, "I am numerically the same as, but not identical with, the divine nature that is numerically the same as, but not identical with, God the Father, who . . . etc.") The mistake is regrettable, but there was no deception involved.

So far, perhaps, so good. But I submit that at this point the ambiguity of the divine mental language is beginning to be troubling. All human languages suffer from ambiguity and vagueness to different degrees. This is inevitable, because we acquire the ability to make precise discriminations, both in sensory perception and in thought, only over an extended period of time, and perfection is never attained or even closely approximated. There is also the fact of the limited processing capability of human brains. None of these limitations, however, apply to divine persons, and I think we would naturally expect a divine language of thought to be very precise indeed, perhaps maximally so. But in the NSWI interpretation of the copula, we find a major ambiguity in the divine language of thought, one that affects matters of great intrinsic importance—and an ambiguity that human languages manage to avoid without much difficulty. To say that this seems incongruous is an understatement.

Indeed, the identity-vs.-NSWI ambiguity has implications that reach even farther than we have seen so far. Given this ambiguity, *no sentence can be formulated in the divine language of thought that refers specifically to one of the three divine persons.* Any referring expression used to refer to a divine person (say, the Holy Spirit) can be understood as, "the person who is NSWI to the divine essence, which is NSWI to [the referring expression in question], who . . ." The person so referred to can be any of the three divine persons—even the Holy Spirit himself, since the NSWI relation is non-transitive. So acts of referring easily accomplished in human languages are impossible in the divine mental language!

This does not mean, of course, that the divine persons could not know to whom they were referring. Just as we humans often use ambiguous expressions but know clearly which proposition we are intending to express, so a divine person could use an expression of divine mentalese knowing full well whether he intended to refer to Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. But this prompts us to wonder, why would the divine persons bother with tokens in the ambiguous language of thought? Why would they not think directly in terms of propositions, as Williams admits that they could? In any case, divine persons enjoying the mutual interpenetration of perichoresis

would hardly need a language in order to communicate with each other—and surely no creature could understand such a language. It is hardly satisfactory at this point to reply that there must be a divine mental language because otherwise a particular theory of divine mental powers could not be made to work!

There remains one more topic to be addressed: How we are going to go about counting divine mental acts, for example the acts of using a mental token to express a proposition? Until now we have passed over this issue, but now the question needs to be addressed. Suppose, for example, both the Son and the Holy Spirit make use of the sentence-token, "I shall become incarnate." (In this example I am supposing that the Holy Spirit will in fact become incarnate, whether on this planet or some other.) Here we have two persons using a token to express two distinct propositions, propositions that are logically contingent and also logically independent of each other. Does it not seem evident that we have here *two different uses* of one and the same token? Isn't this the only plausible way to read the situation? Williams's answer seems to be that it must be only one use, because the persons have only one set of mental powers between them. Surely, however, this is inadequate. Williams has shown that the "one-use" answer is required by his theory of divine powers. But this does nothing to counteract the otherwise apparent fact that we have here two distinct uses of that token. When Williams's theory is being criticized for its adequacy and coherence, it is question-begging to appeal to that same theory in order to overrule potential objections.

A further, telling point is highlighted by an assertion Williams makes as he is explaining how all three persons can make use of the same mental token of the sentence, "I am wise." "When the Father affirms that 'I am wise'," he tells us, "this affirmation entails that the Father thinks the Father is wise."[22] And so also for the Son and the Holy Spirit. But then comes the telling remark: "The divine persons *are aware of different propositions* if they use a mental token with the indexical 'I' in it."[23] Precisely. Williams could not have told us any more clearly or explicitly that the divine persons are in *different mental states* as each of them makes use of the one token of the sentence "I am wise." And indeed it must be so, if we are to explain how the persons are able to grasp and to assert propositions containing indexicals. But here's the rub: *To be aware of a proposition is precisely to perform a mental act.* And we have been told that in this instance the persons are aware of *different* propositions, which must surely mean that they are performing *different* mental acts. What could be clearer than that? And if this is so, it cannot be the case that the persons have between them only one set of divine mental powers, and one set of divine mental acts.

We are now able to give an unequivocal answer to the title question of this discussion, "Can a Latin Trinity be Social?" If a Latin theory must be

[22]Williams, "Unity of Action," 330.

[23]Williams, "Unity of Action," 330 (emphasis added).

a "one-power" theory, and a Social Trinity one in which the persons can assert propositions including the essential indexical "I," then the answer must be that it cannot. This is a problem not only for Williams, but for any and all one-power views of the Trinity. In order to account for the use of such indexicals by the divine persons, a theory of the Trinity must allow that the persons can engage in "incommunicable" mental acts which belong to one person alone, and that they have the powers that are needed to make such acts possible. And to admit this, is to take a large step in the direction of a view of the Trinity that will be truly and properly social.[24]

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[24]Admittedly, Leftow (in "Anti Social Trinitarianism") manages to hold a multi-powers view while stopping short of social trinitarianism. But there is a price to be paid for this; for details, see Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 109–118.

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