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Alan J. Pihringer

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Trinity: A Philosophical Investigation, by H.E. Baber. SCM Press, 2019. Pp. v + 204. \$92.00 (hardcover).

ALAN J. PIHRINGER, Harvest Baptist

H.E. Baber engages in the field of philosophical theology, which she describes as the study of the “machinery of religious doctrines and the logical problems they involve” (1). While the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not illogical (in the purest sense of the term), it has nonetheless caused many a theologian and philosopher problems over the centuries—problems in articulation and problems in explanation. Yet, it is not a doctrine that comes only by blind religious faith without the possibility of philosophical inquiry and understanding. While some in scholarship may see the philosophical inquiry into theology or doctrine as an inefficient use of time and resources (especially if said inquiry does not answer major human problems or support the formation of a particular philosophical system), others, like Baber, deem the implications of such doctrine both important and interesting. She leads the reader on a philosophical analytic journey of the greatest doctrinal puzzle in history: How can the claim that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God be consistent with the claim that they are also distinct? Or, to state the problem differently, how does one reconcile a monotheistic religious claim with the doctrine of Christ’s divinity?

Baber begins with what I would consider an apologetic to her approach in this work. The early articulations of the Trinitarian doctrine used the philosophical terminology of the day regarding the “substance” of the personages’s identity within the Trinity. Yet, there were disagreements as to what the term referred, making it difficult to buttress one’s inquiry into the matter. Baber, rather, finds that “the substantive question of Trinitarian theology should be approached as a problem of characterizing the relations between Trinitarian Persons that make them count as one God and distinguish them one from another” (16). The Hebrew conviction of monotheism gives a background for inquiry, but even so, one must consider what they meant by the term. Often taken to engender identity and counting, the concept may arguably be better understood to inquire as



to who or what is a worship-worthy divine being. For the Hebrews, only Jehovah met the criteria. This then raises the question, what are the criteria and how does Christianity avoid polytheism when claiming Christ is divine? It was not enough that he be a supernatural being, for many religions have a plethora of such beings. Rather, the bar was set for one who was the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent creator. That being the case, identity *per se* is not as important as meeting the criteria for divinity. Much of the Trinitarian doctrine would then hinge on the Persons satisfying such criteria. But then this creates other problems, as per the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles (PII): if the persons who meet the criteria are then indistinguishable in all intrinsic and extrinsic relational properties they are identical. If one were to relax the criteria to distinguish the Persons, then the Persons may no longer count as God. "There are no philosophically respectable arguments for the existence of lesser supernatural beings [that are] anything like the gods of the Greeks" (37). Thus, it is more fruitful to begin the inquiry with the relations of the Persons (the processions or relations of origin) and address the identity question in a further study.

Baber deconstructs the normal distinctions historically given to the Trinitarian problem—designated as the De Régnon Paradigm (as implied in the works of Catholic historian Theodore de Régnon) between the Latin Trinitarianism of Augustine and Aquinas against the Greek/Social Trinitarianism of the Cappadocian Fathers. The Latin school began with unity, trying to make sense of the distinctions, while the Greek school did the opposite. Scholars who have attempted to discuss such a distinction have found that the differences do not line up as neatly as first thought. Social Trinitarianism focuses on the distinctiveness of the Persons—each being a distinct center of consciousness with their own knowledge, will, and action, yet so tightly woven together that they form one particular social unit or society. Some concerns arise in that the Social view is unable to answer concerns about how each distinct Person of divinity would avoid disagreeing over agendas and actions. It could be argued that the Father is authoritative and the other Persons merely defer to him, but this does not explain how or why this deference takes place. Baber sees the De Régnon distinction as one of a difference in the questions asked of Trinitarian theology; thus one must answer both the Latin and Greek questions accounting for "both the unity and distinctions of the persons" (52). She contends that philosophers ought not seek to defend or define a particular orthodoxy, but rather develop a logically coherent theology that has the capability of affirming monotheism and Christ's divinity. Baber will then argue that the Son and Holy Spirit are divine in virtue of their relation to the Father, the one of whom no greater can be conceived, the unique worship-worthy God. This understanding is of great importance since it seemingly turns PII (as normally understood) on its head. The Persons within the Godhead are indiscernible regarding both intrinsic and extrinsic properties, but are instead discernible only with regard to

their relation with one another. Another consideration is the Council of Nicaea's handling of the subject with its emphasis on the Son being of one "substance" with the Father. Baber argues that this was not so much to define the doctrine as to exclude the Arian heresy. Thus, the work of the philosophic inquiry is to "make sense of the claim that Christ, identified as the Son and distinct from the Father, is fully divine," so the path to consider is that of "the relations between Trinitarian Persons in virtue of which they are distinct but equal to the Father and so fully divine" (60).

Baber specifically tackles and dismantles the normal analytic approach to trinitarian doctrine of Social Trinitarianism (in the form of Three-Self trinitarian theology). Social trinitarians make more of the claim than they are able to prove or deliver and have often used the approach to further their own social or political agendas. This is misplaced as the philosophical inquiry into the Trinity does not have an immediate practical import, but rather addresses the logical difficulties that the doctrine poses. Social Trinitarianism views the Trinity as a divine society where the Persons interact with one another in a manner akin to humans and are therefore a model for human relationships—a veritable gold mine for social scientists to try to advocate for their particular social constructs using the Trinity as their validation. However, the Social Trinitarian view comes at a cost. For example, Baber indicates a central feature of interpersonal relations is epistemic asymmetry, where the individual is privileged to their own epistemic state. Yet, each of the Persons of the Trinity, being omniscient, would know everything about everything including the psychological state of the other. Social Trinitarians will offer proof texts from Scripture and from the church fathers, but their interpretations were not embraced by much of Christianity throughout its history, reconstruction and misinterpretations notwithstanding. For example, Gregory of Nyssa's analogy of the Trinitarian persons sharing a nature to three men sharing a nature has been accepted as demonstrating "three distinct centers of consciousness [that] interact interpersonally with one another in community" (83), yet this results from taking the analogy way beyond its original intention. Social Trinitarians also argue for viewing the Trinity as a community of mutual holy love based on God being perfect in love—a love understood as the desire for the good of the object loved. Since some theologians would argue that self-love is not a virtuous love, and since the creation is not necessary, the argument goes that God must have a love for a distinct divine other. Baber believes that a weakness of the love argument is that it does not explain why there are three (no more, no less) divine subjects, nor does it preclude two or more distinct gods with a mutual love, rather than a monotheistic view of one God with three distinct divine persons. In what she sees as another overreach, Social Trinitarians look to the community of the Godhead "to articulate an understanding of human nature, to provide an account of the good life and the good society, and to support their preferred moral views and political agendas" (96). This venture is problematic in that no two Social Trinitarians agree about the details of human community that the Trinity doctrine supposedly prompts,

they give no impetus as to why their views are different from their secular counterparts, and they do not take serious consideration of the human condition in its fallen state. The danger is using one's Trinitarian theology as a weapon in pushing one's own political agenda. Baber rightly notes that there is "a difficulty in extracting any insights about human nature, moral agendas, or recommendations for social organization from any theological account of the Trinity, including the Social Trinitarians' preferred account" (102). There just is no leverage to the idea that the Trinitarian Persons relate in the same sense as humans; therefore, Social Trinitarian Three-Self doctrine is left wanting.

Baber continues by addressing the answers given by the Latin and Greek questions per her relational take. With the Latin question, since each Person shares the same intrinsic generically divine properties, their distinction must be found in some other difference between them. As mentioned earlier, per the PII, if the Persons share the same relevant properties, they would be identical. Yet the Persons are distinct, so there must be one differentiating property that they do not share. Of course, the PII itself is controversial in that not all agree what qualities count for the purposes of the principle, and if it includes both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities or solely intrinsic. In addition, counterexamples appear to weaken the PII argument (for example Max Black's illustration of two identical spheres in a symmetrical universe). Baber considers other possibilities for making the distinction (what one might consider weaker versions of the PII). One view is that the objects have haecceities which are "impure properties that make them the particular individuals they are and distinguish them from other individuals, including their qualitative duplicates" (115). These would allow non-qualitative differences in properties without implying inequality between objects. There are also ways of differentiating Persons through the asymmetric relation of objects to one another or their irreflexive relation (as, for example, two identical spheres that are one mile from each other but are obviously not one mile from themselves). In addition, some Social Trinitarians argue that each of the Persons within the Trinity might have some hypostatic properties intrinsic and essential to them that are indiscernible to mere mortals. However, if the persons are not intrinsically differentiated as in such models, it is possible they are extrinsically differentiated. Sabellianism (modalism) attempted to differentiate the Persons through their communication with the world—the same being interacting with the world in three distinct ways. This heretical view, while not necessarily logically problematic from an economic Trinitarian perspective, fails to distinguish divine Persons and violates the Necessity of Identity, since it allows that God is not necessarily Trinitarian. One final possibility is Structuralism, investigating the structural features of the subject. Most often used in mathematics, a structure is "the abstract form of a system, which ignores or abstracts away from any features of the objects that do not bear on their relations. . . . The objects of a system occupy places within the structure and, since different systems may

exemplify the same structure, different objects may occupy the same place within a structure" (141). The Trinitarian Persons can be understood as places within a structure differentiated by their asymmetrical relations. Since each part in the system is an individual substance with a rational nature, the Persons are objectively distinct, and the differentiating relations are real relations all of which are essential to the system. Therefore, we may "understand the Trinitarian Persons as objects differentiated by the places they occupy within the Trinitarian structure" (144). Although not a perfect explanation, it does offer a way to differentiate the Persons by the places they occupy within the structure.

The Greek question assumes there are three divine Persons and inquires about what it is that makes them one God. Since the divinity of the Father is not in dispute, the larger question is what then makes the Son and Holy Spirit divine in a way that preserves the shared nature? Some claim that the Son and Spirit are dependent on the Father metaphysically, therefore an account of the relation is due—a relation that is atemporal, asymmetric, and necessary. The term "Father" was oft utilized to refer to the paradigmatic divine being, but this in no way granted him some special metaphysical status that made the Son and Spirit metaphysically dependent on him nor made them in any way subordinate. Instead, in response to the Greek question, "we develop a Trinitarian theology in which the Father is the source of unity, uniting the Trinitarian Persons by the relations of ontological dependence that the Son and Spirit bear to the Father" (162). Baber suggests that there is a dependence of Son on Father, where the Son is divine in virtue of the Father being divine, but it is not a causal dependence. The existence and character of the Father explains the existence and character of Father and Son, but not the other way around. *Grounding* sets the direction of a satisfactory explanation and sets the stage for further discussion on the metaphysics of the Trinity. The Father is the ground and not the cause in the ontological relations of the Persons. Still, it is a struggle to make sense of the claim that one eternal, necessary being is dependent upon another eternal, necessary being. The grounding account views God the Father in some (seemingly undefined) sense the principle upon which the other Trinitarian Persons depend. "Grounds and the grounded are not 'separate existences.' They are not temporally or modally distinct" (176). Being given this answer I could not help asking how exactly this grounding relation works, but as Baber herself admits this cries out for further discussion which I believe ought to occur as others interact with this book.

While not intending to be exhaustive, Baber's work brings to the fore several of the most important ideas regarding this subject. It is a perfect complement of her previous articles without rehashing the same information. She fairly handles opposing views, giving strong reasons for her disagreements. This is a deft example of philosophical theology at work, fulfilling its calling of demonstrating the importance of the subject while also making it interesting. Philosophers and theologians would benefit from drinking deeply from this well.