Is The Latin Social Trinity Defensible? A Rejoinder to Scott M. Williams

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A REJOINDER TO SCOTT M. WILLIAMS

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Scott Williams has provided a careful and detailed response (Williams 2020; page numbers in the text refer to this article) to my critique of his Latin Social model of the Trinity (Hasker 2019). Here I shall reply to his defense, and I will argue that this model is, in fact, indefensible. First, however, I must attend to his criticism of my own Social trinitarian view. The reason for his objection to my view (as well as to those of Richard Swinburne and Brian Leftow) is that it is a "multi-powers" view, attributing to each of the three trinitarian Persons[1] his own set of powers to perform mental acts. Williams, in contrast, insists on a "one-power" view, in which there is only one set of mental powers for the entire Trinity, and all mental acts are shared between the three Persons. Nevertheless, the Persons are able to refer to themselves using personal pronouns such as "I"; this is the "social" side of the view.

I have come to think, however, that the terminology of "one-power" vs. "multi-power" is potentially confusing. By way of analogy, consider an electrical circuit with three outlets. In one sense, there is one "power source" here; all the power utilized comes from the single electrical circuit. But one might also say, there are three "power sources," in that any of the three outlets can be used individually to power an appliance of some kind. Similarly, for the three divine Persons there is "one power"; the power for any one of the Persons to do anything comes from the one "Power Source," the divine nature. But also, each Person has the ability, utilizing this power, to perform acts of his own that are not also acts of the other two Persons; each Person, one might say, is his own "Power Outlet." It might be clearer if we were to speak of a "one-agent" vs. a "multi-agent" view. But since the terminology of "one-power" vs. "multi-power" has become

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[1] I employ "Persons," with the capital "P," to designate the trinitarian Three without thereby taking a position on the question of the ontological status of the Persons.

established in this discussion, it is better to retain it, with the understanding that a "multi-power" view is really a "multi-agent" view.

<center>*Williams's Critique of Social Trinitarianism*</center>

In his original article, Williams's criticism of the multi-powers views was based on the *necessary agreement* (NA) of the wills of the three trinitarian Persons, a requirement for a proper trinitarianism that, he alleged, is not adequately safeguarded by a multi-powers view. I gave my reasons for thinking that NA is adequately secured by my view, and while Williams disagrees he does not pursue this point further. Instead, he introduces a new criticism: he claims that my view is in conflict with what the seven ecumenical councils have said about the Trinity. He notes my endorsement of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, and my appeal to the great Cappadocian theologians as guides for our understanding of the Trinity, and concludes "it seems that [Hasker] takes the ecumenical councils as good guides for our constructing and evaluating models of the Trinity" (98). In view of this, I need to say something about my own view concerning the role of the ecumenical councils in this matter.

I acknowledge and affirm the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding Jesus' disciples into the truth concerning him (John 16:12–15). I do not, however, believe that the Spirit has conferred infallibility on the disciples, not even on those assembled at "ecumenical councils." The councils so designated do not, in my view, possess inherent authority as being termed ecumenical; arguably, near the beginning of the conciliar period the very idea of a council possessing such authority did not exist. Such authority as their pronouncements have for us derives from the fact that the Church has found those pronouncements, over a considerable period of time, to be good and faithful renditions of its faith in God and in Christ. But there is room, I believe, for questioning as to whether this is in fact the case for particular pronouncements. I myself do not, for example, "salute and venerate" the relics of the saints or the ikons which depict them, as enjoined by the seventh council. (I do not however encourage or condone the destruction of such images.) On account of this stand, I may be condemned by that council; if so, I will have to bear up under the weight of their anathemas.

What then is the evidence Williams has marshalled against my Social trinitarianism? The clearest statements come, not from decrees of the actual councils, but from letters of Pope Agatho to the sixth council (Constantinople 3)—letters which are endorsed by the council itself as containing sound doctrine.[2] To be sure, the pronouncements concerning the Trinity occupy only a small fraction of those letters, and the trinitarian

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[2]Williams also cites a text from the fifth ecumenical council; I judge, however, that this pronouncement is not too difficult to reconcile with my Social trinitarian version of the doctrine.

assertions are not closely related to the main theme of the letters, and of the council itself, which was devoted to affirming the "dyothelite" view concerning the person of Christ. (One might then assume that it was Agatho's view concerning that topic that was the primary reason for the council's endorsement of the letters.) Nevertheless, I agree that these views of Pope Agatho deserve consideration as we formulate our own understanding of the Trinity.

We have learned, however, that proof-texting using the Bible can be a poor theological method, and I submit that proof-texting using conciliar pronouncements can also be a dubious procedure. So rather than rushing forward with my own interpretation of Agatho's statements, I would like to inquire about the consistency of those statements with certain ideas of Gregory of Nyssa, as expressed in his well-known treatise, *On "Not Three Gods."* In discussing the unity of action of the divine Persons, Gregory writes,

> For as when we learn concerning the God of the universe, from the words of Scripture, that He judges all the earth, we say that He is the Judge of all things through the Son: and again, when we hear that the Father judgeth no man, we do not think that the Scripture is at variance with itself…(for He Who judges all the earth does this by His Son to Whom He has committed all judgment; and everything which is done by the Only-begotten has its reference to the Father, so that He Himself is at once the Judge of all things and judges no man, by reason of His having, as we said, committed all judgment to the Son . . .) (Gregory of Nyssa 1976, 334)

The upshot of this is: the Father delegates the work of judging to the Son; this delegation is an act of the Father alone, not of the Son, since no one delegates a task to himself. Also, the Son performs the task of judging, not the Father; it is explicitly said that the Father does not, himself, perform this task. Now, if what Gregory says here is correct, or even if it is possible, things look bad for the one-power model, and for Agatho's pronouncements insofar as they imply that model. For we have acts of one trinitarian Person that are not in the same way acts of another trinitarian Person—and if actual acts, then of necessity the power to perform such acts.

Williams, however, will not accept the straightforward interpretation of Gregory's words, as cited above. Instead, he understands Gregory as working here with the doctrine of "appropriations," according to which there are not, indeed *could not possibly be,* distinct acts of Father and Son such as are implied in the scripture (John 5:22–23) cited by Gregory. There is, instead, a *single* divine action, performed by both Father and Son together as a single agent; we humans, however, "appropriate" various phases of that action to one or another Person as an aid to our imperfect human understanding of the matter.

I do not think this is a sound interpretation. Indeed, if Williams's interpretation is correct, this would imply considerable ineptitude on Gregory's part in constructing his argument. Gregory is not, at this stage in the discussion, engaged in a process of exegesis for its own sake. He has

no need to introduce the text from John's Gospel, except as an illustration for the point he is presently trying to make. That point is precisely the *unity of operation* between the three divine Persons, a unity which makes it inappropriate (according to Gregory) to designate them as "three Gods." If however Gregory is a one-power theorist, as Williams supposes, he has committed the blunder of citing an example which, if taken at face value, proves exactly the opposite of the point he is trying to make! For a one-power (or one-agent) theorist, it is simply impossible that there should be diverse actions (delegating and judging) for Father and Son as stated in the Johannine text. So the very example Gregory has introduced in order to illustrate his point instead contradicts that point, and must immediately be itself corrected in order to avoid misleading the reader![3] I for one do not believe Gregory was thus inept in his exposition. Rather, I believe the point of the example is precisely this: it is by the close *coordination* of the distinct acts of Father and Son, that they demonstrate the "unity of action" that Gregory is so anxious to emphasize.

If this is correct, it seems that the comparison of Agatho with Gregory leaves my view in a rather favorable position. If a way can be found to reconcile Agatho's statements with Gregory's,[4] then I can simply adopt that as my own reading of Agatho, and Williams's objection to my view based on Agatho will have disappeared. If on the other hand reconciliation is not possible, I will cast my lot with Gregory, and will have no regrets in so doing.[5]

In any case, these matters have rather little bearing on the rest of what will be discussed in this reply. My objections to the Latin Social model are based on philosophical considerations of logical coherence and general plausibility, and these considerations will not be affected by conciliar pronouncements. If at the end of the day Williams wishes to invoke conciliar

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[3]It is interesting to note here that Williams's view forces us to understand the scriptural text as saying something that is strictly—indeed, necessarily—false; in order to get it right, we have to interpret the text by means of a device (appropriations) that is nowhere suggested in the text itself.

[4]I do not, myself, offer here any interpretation of Agatho's words. I should however like to ask Agatho: Is it possible that, as the Gospel says, the Father should delegate the work of judging to the Son, and that the Son should be the one performing this work? Perhaps Williams will be able to answer this question on Agatho's behalf.

[5]I must confess that I have some difficulty in understanding what Williams says about Richard of St. Victor. It is acknowledged that Richard laid heavy emphasis on the relations of mutual love within the Trinity; this is a theme that fits much better with Social trinitarianism as opposed to a one-agent model like Williams's. Williams cites Richard as saying that the Son and Holy Spirit "receive from [the Father] as a gift even [that] due love, with which they repay his gratuitous love" (107). Williams interprets this as saying that the Son's love of the Father is first of all an act *of the Father,* which the Father then bestows on the Son as a gift, so that the Son and the Father together perform the one act which is the Son's loving the Father! I don't think I understand this. Surely it is adequate to understand Richard as saying that the Father bestows on the Son the *capacity* to love the Father in return; it is not necessary to think that the Father *performs the act* of the Son's loving the Father before gifting that act to the Son.

authority to counter whatever conclusions we may reach on the basis of those other considerations, we can deal with this at the appropriate time.

Ambiguity in the Divine Language of Thought

But we need to see how the Latin Social view fares in the face of my criticisms. A place to start is my thought experiment in which Peter is told by the Holy Spirit, "I am God the Father, who sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." Williams is perhaps unnecessarily solemn in addressing this example, which I admitted to be "far-fetched." My concern, as I made clear, is not that Peter has been lied to by the Holy Spirit. Rather, the point of the thought experiment is to bring out the rather pronounced ambiguity of the divine language of thought as it is described by Williams. In this language, the expression translated as "am" has either of two quite distinct meanings: It may signify identity—"I am the Father"—which is the way Peter originally understood it. But it can also signify the relation expressed by "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." (This is how the assertion was understood by the Holy Spirit, and is the reason he was not lying to Peter.) This is a serious ambiguity, and one might well wonder why God's language of thought should be thus ambiguous. I do not suppose, as Williams assumes, that the divine Persons are confused. But that a divine language of thought should be ambiguous in the way suggested strikes me as unseemly. Our human languages, on the other hand, manage to avoid this particular ambiguity. (Of course I do *not* say, as Williams mistakenly claims, that human languages are not ambiguous at all; indeed I assert quite the opposite!) This ambiguity, as I pointed out, has the unfortunate consequence that *no divine person can formulate a sentence in the divine language of thought that identifies that person as the person he is.* Any referring expression used to refer to a divine person (say, to the Holy Spirit) can be understood as, "the person who is NSWI [numerically the same without identity] to the divine essence, which is NSWI to the Holy Spirit, who . . ." Why, then, we may ask, does God put up with this, consenting to conduct God's own internal thoughts in this seriously ambiguous medium? The only answer to this I have been able to find is that without this ambiguity Williams's theory of a Latin Social Trinity could not be made to work!

Is There a Divine Language of Thought?

But carry this a step further: Why should we suppose that God's mental life is conducted in such a "language of thought" at all? In my previous paper I suggested that the notion of a divine language of thought is precisely a cost of Williams's theory, lacking independent motivation. And in fact, the reasoning that Williams himself gives in favor of positing such a language of thought is entirely of this sort: if we did not have the divine mental tokens "the divine persons would not share

intellectual acts" ([Williams 2017](), 333), and we would not have a Latin Social Trinity. Now, however, he does attempt to provide some independent motivation:

> We need to explain why a divine person's mental act is directed at (among all possible propositions) the proposition it is directed at. (Put otherwise, why is one aware of a certain proposition and not some other proposition?) We could say that there is something that directs a mental act to a proposition, namely a mental token of a sentence in a context. Or, we could say there is no explanation; it is a brute fact that a mental act is directed at a certain proposition. But we should avoid positing brute facts when we can give an illuminating explanation (115).

It seems to me that the insistence on the need for an explanation at this point is rather arbitrary. If we need an explanation of "why a divine person's mental act is directed at (among all possible propositions) the proposition it is directed at," why don't we need an explanation of "why a divine person's use of a mental token is directed at (among all possible tokens) the token it is directed at"? In either case, "it just is" seems to be all the explanation that is called for. Explanations have to stop somewhere.

Even we human beings do not, in general, need to formulate the propositions we affirm in inner mental sentences. Consider for example the mental processes of a race driver who negotiates a road circuit. The driver does not say to himself, "If I run over that curbing I will have less control of my car as I exit the curve." If he needed to do that for each of the hundreds of decisions he makes in a single circuit of the course, he would be unable to drive the car. Instead, he simply sees where his car is going and makes a small adjustment with the steering wheel. To be sure, there are reasons why, in some cases, we humans do need to formulate explicitly our propositions (as I must do in thinking out this paper). But it is doubtful that any of the reasons why we need to do this would translate to the divine case.

So to sum up: It is still the case that Williams's model postulates tokens in a divine mental language, tokens whose postulation is justified only by the role they play in Williams's own model, in that they enable him to avoid a multi-powers view of the divine Persons. And this language itself is said to be ambiguous in an important way; again, this assumption is made only because the ambiguity enables Williams's model to work.

Are the Awarenesses of the Divine Persons Shared?

But suppose Williams is right about all this. (The reader will be aware by this time that, in my view, this is an unwarranted supposition.) There nevertheless remains, I claim, a problem for Williams's view, a problem which, if it is not successfully met, invalidates everything else that can be said on behalf of his model. Williams states my objection as follows:

> Suppose the Son and Holy Spirit each become incarnate. On the Latin Social model, if the Son and Holy Spirit share numerically the same use of a divine

mental token of "I shall become incarnate," and it is true that each becomes incarnate, then each thinks a different proposition and what each thinks is logically contingent and what each thinks is logically independent of each other. Hasker then asks, "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?" Hasker contends that it should seem evident to us that if divine persons think logically contingent and logically independent propositions, then it must be the case that the persons have numerically different incommunicable mental acts (111).

Williams says that in response, he "need[s] to be able to explain how it is that e.g., the Son and Holy Spirit could think logically contingent propositions that are also logically independent propositions." (To this it must be added that the Son and the Spirit must be able to do this by each of them performing the one, numerically identical, mental act.) In replying to this, Williams refers back to an explanation given earlier in his article:

> [I]n the case of the persons' shared use of a divine mental token of "I am wise," God the Father's using it entails that the Father is introspectively aware of his (i.e., the Father's) being wise, the Son's using it entails that the Son is introspectively aware of his (i.e., the Son's) being wise, and the Holy Spirit's using it entails that the Holy Spirit is introspectively aware of his (i.e., the Holy Spirit's) being wise. Introspective awareness supervenes on a certain agent's using a mental token that includes essential indexicals like "I." Likewise, experiential consciousness supervenes on an agent's using a mental token.[6] . . . If a simpler ontological account of these phenomena works, then we should go with the simpler ontological account. . . . (If the Father uses a mental token, then the Son and Holy Spirit necessarily use this mental token because all divine persons share numerically the same (set of) mental power and numerically the same uses of numerically the same mental token.) (104)

This needs to be examined carefully. The mental act that is shared between the Persons is the use of the token of the mentalese sentence, "I am wise." So far, perhaps, so good. It is this shared token that directs this mental act to a proposition—in this case, to a different proposition for each Person. But where, we may wonder, is the ontological account of the awareness on the part of each Person of the diverse propositions of which each of them becomes aware—in the case of the Father, that "I (viz. the Father) am wise," for the Son, that "I (viz. the Son) am wise," and for the Spirit, that "I (viz. the Spirit) am wise"? No such account is provided by merely stating that each of the Persons is making use of the same identical mental token. Williams, however, states[7] that his account of indexicals like "I" is "an externalist account; so, the ontological facts required are the agent and the agent's context. Here, the ontological facts are (1) God the Father and (2) using a token of "I am wise." I claimed that these explain (and

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[6]Williams distinguishes three types of conscious phenomena: experiential consciousness, access consciousness, and introspective awareness. The differences between them do not, however, play a role in my discussion of this objection.

[7]In a private communication.

ground) why the Father knows what it's like to think < I (God the Father) am wise>."

I don't think such an account can be satisfactory. It may well be that facts (1) and (2) *explain* the Father's awareness, in that it is impossible that those facts obtain and yet the Father fail to be aware. But it cannot be that those facts *ground* the awareness, in the sense that those facts, by themselves, are what the awareness consists of. The account given is "externalist," precisely in the sense that in them there is no mention of *consciousness,* or *awareness.* That is exactly what we ought to expect, for surely consciousness is precisely something *internal,* and therefore something a purely externalist account cannot include. So I stand by my assertion, that Williams's account *does not* account for the awareness in question. What we need is a mental event describable as *the Father's awareness that he, the Father, is wise.* This event, however, is a mental act unique to the Father; it cannot be shared with the Son or the Holy Spirit. Such an act is inconsistent with the Latin Social model.

We get some insight into Williams's thinking about this when he writes,

> [I]t seems unfitting to ascribe to omnipotent and omniscient divine persons more mental acts of using a divine mental token of "I shall become incarnate," than one act of using this divine mental token. Why posit several mental acts here, when one mental act will do the same explanatory work? It is a simpler ontological explanation (114).

My reply to this, of course, is that one mental act will not, by itself, "do the same explanatory work"; in particular, it will not explain the awareness, by each divine Person, of the diverse propositions affirmed by the Persons—on the one hand, "I myself shall become incarnate," on the other, "the Son, who is not myself, shall become incarnate"—in consequence of the one use of the token in question.

Viewed in this light, it almost seems that the introduction of the mental token of "I am wise" (or, "I shall become incarnate") functions as a diversion. (I do not say that it was introduced for that purpose.) We are led to focus on the one mental token, common to the three Persons, and on the use of that token, also common to the Persons[8]; in the process of doing so, we easily overlook the diverse consequences of each Person's use of the token, consequences which also stand in need of an ontological account.[9] But when we provide the needed account, we have abandoned the notion

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[8]Previously I said that there must be a different use of the token for each Person. Williams would dispute this, insisting that there is only one, shared, use of the token. But even if this is so, there is a distinct propositional awareness for each Person, and these awarenesses cannot be shared.

[9]It is clear from the material at the top of p. 106 that only the divine Person's use of a mental token counts as a "mental act." For some reason, the experiential consciousness and the introspective consciousness that result from this use are not deemed to be mental acts.

that all mental acts are common to all of the trinitarian Persons. The Latin Social Trinity cannot be maintained.

Conclusion

There is more in Williams's comment that could be discussed, but I am trying to be brief. Even if I am right that the Latin Social model cannot be correct, this model can make a significant contribution to trinitarian theology. The model constitutes an unusually thorough and determined attempt to work out the consequences of views a good many theologians and philosophers have taken to be essential to the doctrine of the Trinity: for instance, the one-agent view of the Trinity, as well as the one-power view. If, as I have argued, the attempt is unsuccessful, proponents of those views may find themselves wondering whether some even more elaborate rescue project is in order, or whether a revision of their fundamental assumptions is called for.

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